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# "I Need to Fight the Power, But I Need that New Ferrari": Conspicuous Consumption, New-School Hip-hop and "the New Rock & Roll"

Emmett H. Robinson Smith  
*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor  
Keightley, Keir  
*The University of Western Ontario*  
Coates, Norma  
*The University of Western Ontario*

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## Abstract

2017 marked the year in which hip-hop officially became the most listened-to genre in the United States. This thesis explores hip-hop music's rise to its now-hegemonic position within the music industry, seeking to provide insight into the increasingly popular sentiment that hip-hop is "the new rock & roll". The "new-school" hip-hop artists of the last six years or so have also been the subject of widespread critical disdain, especially for their heightened degree of emphasis on conspicuous consumption. This study will track hip-hop's ascent from the mid-1980s through to its current position as both a political vehicle and a commercial product. This will result in a historically informed discussion of Migos' 2013 hit "Versace," a song that can be read as a signpost pointing towards many of new-school hip-hop's most prominent characteristics. Analysis of "Versace" will then inform a broader examination of new-school hip-hop as "the new rock & roll". This discussion will seek to better understand hip-hop's new-school artists not necessarily as the harbingers of hip-hop's death, as has been claimed by so many, but rather as agents of social reorganization, which, I argue, has always been one of hip-hop's most valued characteristics.

Keywords: Hip-hop, rock & roll, rock, pop, conspicuous consumption, hegemony, subculture, mainstream, production, consumption, capitalism, materialism, politics, conscious rap, civil-rights, bling, commercialism, authenticity, criticism, class, race, gender, trap, new-school, Migos, Golden Age, crunk, gangsta, swag rap.

## Lay Summary

This study examines hip-hop's rise to popular music hegemony both as a political vessel *and* as a commercial product. It uses a chronology of hip-hop history in order to bring about a more nuanced understanding of new-school hip-hop's position as both the current dominant industry force and as "the new rock & roll." By following hip-hop's gradual ascension to hegemony beginning in the mid-1980s, a helpful context can be considered with the goal of answering several questions: How have the terms of what constitutes "real," authentic hip hop changed as a result of hip-hop's newfound hegemonic position? How can new-school "swag rap" be understood not as the "death" of hip-hop, as some critics claim, but rather as an indication of hip-hop's implication in the larger historical trajectory of Western society? On one level, this thesis operates as a defense of new-school hip-hop. But, on a broader level: when do old models of criticism lose their utility in the discussion of new music?

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Thank you to my peers, all of whom I can now call friends, for helping to make this experience memorable. Thank you for the invigorating conversations, for broadening my perspective, and for allowing me to share mine.

To my friends out West: thank you for cultivating my love of hip-hop, for showing enthusiasm in my studies, and for encouraging me when I needed it. Thank you especially to my friends Gabriel Lunn and Corey Spetifore for their active interest in this project and for engaging me in thoughtful, rewarding discussion.

From the bottom of my heart, I would like to thank my parents, Jill and Steven. Thank you for nurturing my love of arts and culture from an early age. Thank you for putting my best interests first. Thank you for allowing me to pursue my passions and for encouraging me to always shoot high.

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## Introduction

In 2017, Nielsen SoundScan reported that hip-hop had officially become the most-listened-to genre in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This project attempts to analyze hip-hop's ascension to the status of, as Kanye West put it in 2013, "the new rock and roll,"<sup>2</sup> i.e. the hegemonic genre in the current musical landscape. In addition to this change within the larger music industry, the last six years or so have seen a change in the sound of dominant hip-hop in the form of the "new-school." One of the many shifts within hip-hop that the new-school has brought about is a heightened degree of emphasis on material wealth and conspicuous consumption in recent years. Capitalism and consumption have become increasingly prevalent as central themes within hip-hop lyrics themselves; new-school hip-hop in 2019 presents a profound importance on conspicuous consumption and capitalism by any means necessary.<sup>3</sup> The prominence of this embrace of consumption in new-school hip-hop has been dubbed "swag rap" by some.<sup>4</sup> This title will be used in further discussion.

The new wave of conspicuous consumption in new-school hip-hop has been the subject of widespread criticism from both inside and outside the hip-hop community, as it has been labeled as mindless, "anti-conscious,"<sup>5</sup> and ultimately detrimental to what are claimed to be the "core values"

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, "'2017 U.S. Music Year-End Report.'" *Nielsen*. January 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Kanye West, "Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Part 1." YouTube video. *BBC Radio 1*. September 23, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2T0fMkZoMo>.

<sup>3</sup> Geoff Harkness, "Thirty years of Rapsplotation: hip-hop culture in American Cinema" 178.

<sup>4</sup> "Swag Rap." *TVTropes*. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SwagRap>

<sup>5</sup> "Henry Adaso writes, "Conscious hip-hop is often confused with its musical cousin, political hip-hop, possibly because they both speak to social turmoil. A disdain for commercialism is another common thread that weaves the two styles together. Politically charged songs by rappers such as Dead Prez and Public Enemy are usually delivered in a militant fashion. The conscious message, on the other hand, empowers by uplifting the listener."<sup>5</sup> "Anti-conscious," then, indicates a rejection of this ideology.

of hip-hop (such as rebellion, authenticity and political agitation). Vince Staples encapsulates this dichotomy on his 2016 track “Lift Me Up,” in which he muses, “I need to fight the power, but I need that new Ferrari,” juxtaposing the politically engaged mantra of Public Enemy (“Fight the Power”) with the unabashed materialism that has become central to current hip-hop. The present study attempts to analyze the emphasis on money within hip-hop as both a symptom and a symbol of the genre’s newfound cultural power, thereby examining how this dynamic plays out inside the music’s lyrics and themes.

Hip-hop has long had a complicated relationship with capitalism. Potter claimed in *Spectacular Vernacular* 20 years ago, “hip hop is not merely a critique of capitalism, it is a counter-formation that takes up capitalism’s gaps and contradictions and creates a whole new mode, a whole new economics.”<sup>6</sup> By tracking hip-hop’s gradual ascension to hegemony beginning in the mid-1980s, an illuminating context can be considered with the goal of answering several questions: How have the terms of what constitutes “real,” authentic hip hop changed as a result of hip-hop’s newfound hegemonic position? How can new-school “swag rap” be understood not as the “death” of hip-hop, as some critics claim, but rather as an indication of hip-hop’s implication in the larger historical trajectory of Western society? Mainstream discourse – academic, institutional, and more – is finally recognizing older, more traditional forms of hip-hop as legitimate. But the widespread, “trap”<sup>7</sup>-driven stylistic overhaul that post-Migos, “new-school” acts have brought to hip-hop in the last six or so years has received widespread criticisms and negative representations. The “old-school vs. new-school” debate has been present in hip-hop discourse almost since the genre’s birth, but in the last six years or so, this discussion has intensified as swaths of new-school hip-hop stars emerge. Though

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<sup>6</sup> Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995,) 111.

<sup>7</sup> We will further discuss the characteristics of trap music in the following section.



the “swag rap”-oriented new-school is considered a rather novel phenomenon, the deliberation surrounding it is rooted in age-old ideas surrounding authenticity, “art,” and, ultimately, ethics. What happens when old criteria are no longer applicable in the evaluation of new music? What does it mean that hip-hop is now often discussed as “the new rock n’ roll?”

## A. Definitions

First, we must establish some working definitions of key terms that will be used in this thesis. The first is “**Golden Age**.” Though the years constituting “Golden Age” hip-hop varies depending who you ask or what you read, it is most commonly discussed as falling between 1986 and 1989.<sup>8</sup> The “Golden Age” is “characterized by its diversity, quality, innovation and influence. There were strong themes of Afrocentricity and political militancy, while the music was experimental and the ITS sampling eclectic.”<sup>9</sup> New York, the home of Golden Age artists such as Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Big Daddy Kane, Boogie Down Productions, EPMD, Eric B. and Rakim, and Public Enemy, is commonly considered as the area most associated with this era. The “Golden Age” is also referred to by some scholars and writers as the “Golden Era.”

Next, we have the term “**conscious rap**.” In his article “Conscious Rap Shows Genre’s Uplifting Side, Henry Adaso writes,

Conscious rap is a subgenre of hip-hop that focuses on creating awareness and imparting knowledge. Conscious rappers traditionally have decried violence, discrimination, and other ailments of society. Conscious rap is propelled by the conviction that radical social change comes through knowledge of self and personal discovery.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*. (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>9</sup> “The Golden Age of Hip-Hop.” *TVTropes*.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Adaso, “Conscious Rap Shows Genre’s Uplifting Side.” *ThoughtCo*. December 13, 2018.

Adaso notes that though the terms “conscious rap” and “political hip-hop” are often conflated, there is a distinct difference:

Conscious hip-hop is often confused with its musical cousin, political hip-hop, possibly because they both speak to social turmoil. A disdain for commercialism is another common thread that weaves the two styles together. Politically charged songs by rappers such as Dead Prez and Public Enemy are usually delivered in a militant fashion. The conscious message, on the other hand, empowers by uplifting the listener.<sup>11</sup>

The term “message-oriented rap,” which is used later, can be seen to operate in the same realm as “conscious rap.”

One of the most important terms in this project is “**new-school**.” The term “new-school” has been used in a variety of ways in hip-hop discourse. “New-school” first referred to the music of 1983-84 New York artists such as Run-D.M.C. and LL Cool J:<sup>12</sup> “At the forefront was Run-D.M.C., a trio of middle-class African Americans who fused rap with hard rock, defined a new style of hip dress, and became staples on MTV as they brought rap to a mainstream audience.”<sup>13</sup> As hip-hop has developed over the years, however, the meaning of the term “new-school” has been applied differently in different situations: “The terms “old school” and “new school” have fallen more and more into the common vernacular as synonyms for “old” and “new” and are often applied in this conversational way to hip-hop.”<sup>14</sup> This original “new-school” definition has been complicated further in recent years, with major hip-hop publications such as *XXL* dubbing the new class of dominant hip-hop artists such as Lil Uzi Vert, Lil Yachty, 21 Savage, Kodak Black, and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Greg Tate and Alan Light. “Hip-hop.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. April 11, 2019. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/art/hip-hop>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “New School Hip-Hop.” *HistoryofHipHop*. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://historyofthehiphop.wordpress.com/music-genres/new-school-hip-hop/>.

others as the “new wave” in 2016.<sup>15</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, my use of “new-school” will refer to this “new wave” of newly popular hip-hop artists from the last six years or so – roughly 2013-2019. After further inquiry, we will see that music streaming has been one of the key influences of this period.

Key to new-school discussions is “**trap**” music. The musical characteristics of trap have become the dominant sound of new-school hip-hop artists. Trap music originated in Atlanta, Georgia and is defined by its connection to the “trap house”: “‘trap’ in trap rap refers to a house used for cooking dope. It has a single entry/exit point so that, once inside, a person is trapped there unless those securing the door allow them to leave. It is, quite literally, a trap.”<sup>16</sup> Atlanta trap pioneer T.I., whose 2003 album *Trap Muzik* is seen by many (T.I. included)<sup>17</sup> as the foundational text of trap music, said that the album is for “whether you in the trap selling dope, in the trap buying dope, or in the trap trying to get out ... It’s informative for people who don’t know nothing about that side of life.”<sup>18</sup> Trap music originated as the soundtrack for the production of crack cocaine in the vastest, and fastest, quantities possible. However, despite its rather specific origins, trap has gone on to be a defining musical genre of the current mainstream.

Also related to new-school is “**swag rap**.” In his 2011 *Atlantic* article “Is ‘Swag’ Here To Stay?” Jason Richards provides a useful discussion of the word “swag.”

[‘Swag’]’s definition is kind of hazy, but that’s a big part of its appeal. As a noun, “swag” conveys style, confidence, triumph and power. At the end of a sentence, it

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<sup>15</sup> XXL Staff, “2016 Freshman Class” The New Wave.” *XXL*. June 13, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Justin Adams Burton, *Posthuman Rap*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 82.

<sup>17</sup> Trace William Cowen, “T.I. Reminds Everyone he Invented Trap Music: ‘Only Fools Dispute Facts!’” *Complex*. April 10, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Puja Patel, “From T.I. to TNGHT: A Look at Trap Rave.” *Stereogum*. August 31, 2012. <https://www.stereogum.com/1115091/from-t-i-to-tnght-a-look-at-trap-rave/top-stories/>.

can used repeatedly as an affirmation, as in, "The stakeholders were very impressed by our second-quarter earnings. Swag. Swag. Swag."

In the same article, Richards cites Ingrid Monson, who is a professor of music and African-American studies at Harvard.<sup>19</sup> "'Swag' seems to me to be especially suited to the ethos of hip hop ... 'Swag, to swagger, to carry oneself with attitude—what could be a more fitting word for hip hop?'"<sup>20</sup> The concept of "swag" can also be illuminated through the lens of Max Weber's *Social Stratification and Power* and Thorstien Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, in which they note the connection between the ownership of property and status. I will discuss this further in section 3.2. The mainstream popularization of the word "swag" in 2011 provides context for "swag rap," which is closely tied with my use of "new-school." "Swag rap" presents a heightened degree of emphasis on "swag," operating with this combination of style, confidence, and power. "Swag rap," it should also be noted, predominantly uses trap music devices.

Ultimately, we are dealing with the following: Hip-hop is the new hegemonic genre in popular music. New-school hip-hop artists, whose sound is largely influenced by trap music, are the dominant commercial artists within hip-hop. And within the new-school, there exists an emphasis on "swag," which is closely tied with conspicuous consumption. This thesis examines the relationships among the Golden Age, conscious rap, trap, new-school, and swag rap and their contributions to the "structure of feeling" surrounding hip-hop at its current position of hegemony here in 2019. In chapter 1, I explore the crossover of hip-hop and its Golden Age in the mid-to-late-1980s as both a political vehicle and as a commercial product. Next, I continue this discussion

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<sup>19</sup> Jason Richards, "Is 'Swag' Here To Stay?" *The Atlantic*. May 26, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/05/is-swag-here-to-stay/239446/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

by examining the forces contributing to hip-hop's stylistic and commercial development in the early-1990s. Chapter 2 turns its attention to the rise of the hip-hop mogul in the late-1990s and early-2000s as a crucial force in hip-hop's development both as a resistant voice and as a commercial product. My discussion of Southern hip-hop moguls leads to an examination of the development of Southern hip-hop in the forms of first crunk, then trap music. Finally, chapter 3 begins with a discussion of African-American bling culture then moves into an inquiry into new-school hip-hop's status as "new rock & roll."

After reviewing the literature used for this thesis, I will begin to track hip-hop's incorporation from subculture to mainstream commercial force in the 1980s and onward. First, though, I want to outline some aspects of hip-hop's current position of commercial hegemony within the music industry.

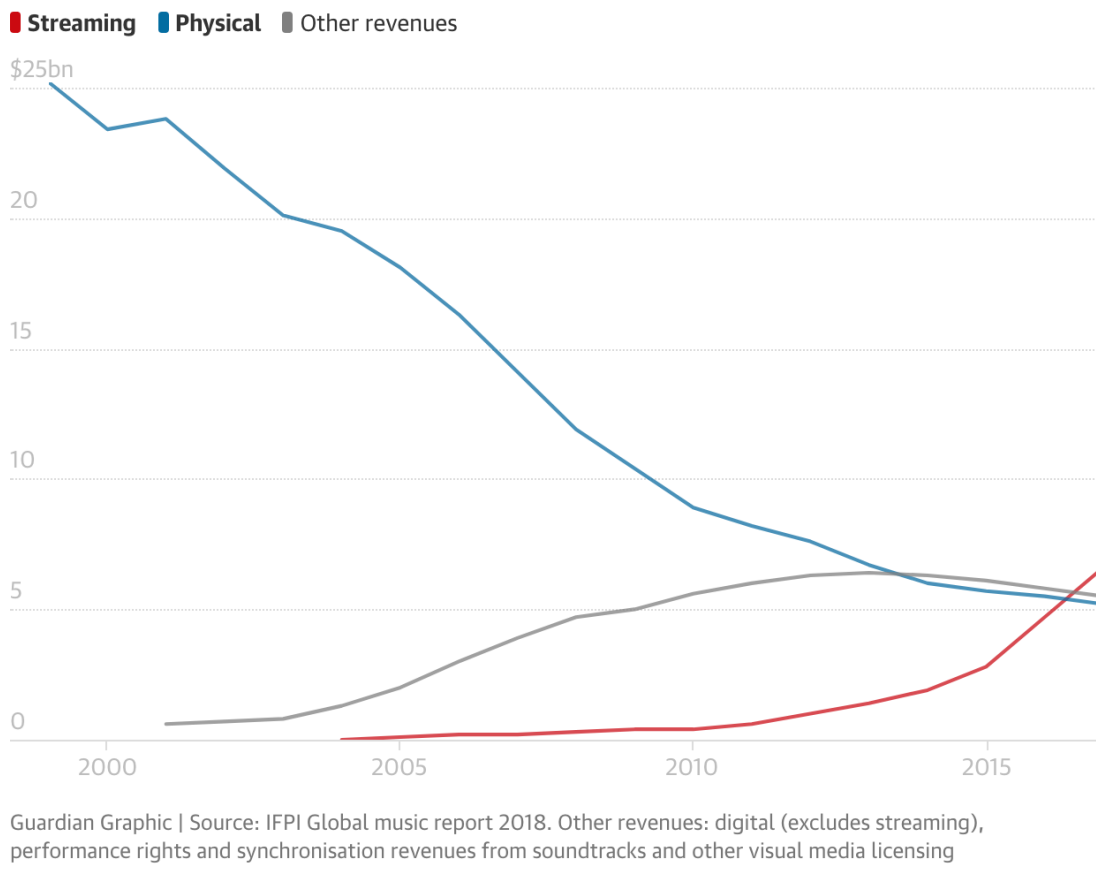
## **B. New-school hip-hop and streaming**

In April 2018, *The Guardian* reported that 2017 marked the year in which revenue generated from music streaming services – \$6.6 billion – surpassed the revenue generated by physical sales.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Sweney, "Slipping discs: music streaming revenues of \$6.6bn surpass CD sales." *The Guardian*. April 24, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/apr/24/music-streaming-revenues-overtake-cds-to-hit-66bn>.

## In 2017 streaming overtook physical sales for the first time as the largest source of global recorded music revenue



22

In the above graph, the red line indicates a considerable increase in the market dominance of music streaming post-2014 or so. This trend gains a heightened significance considering the steady decline of physical music sales, as illustrated by the blue line.

Hip-hop has been perhaps the primary benefactor of the newfound dominance of streaming services. In July of 2018, Nielsen Music reported that 36.4% of all subscription-based music streams were in the “Hip-Hop/R&B” genre,<sup>23</sup> and that “R&B/Hip-Hop” accounted for 31.2% of

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Resnikoff, "Hip-Hop R&B Account for 1 Out of Every 3 Music Streams In America." *Digital Music News*. September 18, 2018. <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2018/07/09/hip->

total music sales in the US that year.<sup>24</sup> Compare this with the genre “Rock,” which accounted for *less than half* of what R&B/Hip-hop did on streaming services at 17.7%,<sup>25</sup> and accounting for 23.1% of total music sales that year.<sup>26</sup>

The recent development of streaming as the dominant mode of music consumption has also affected traditional metrics by which the popularity of music is measured. In July, 2018, for example, after Drake became the first artist to reach 10 billion streams on Apple Music, *Rolling Stone*’s Amy X. Wang contended that Drake’s “accomplishments belong less to the rapper himself and much more to streaming services his album is listened to on, which have exploded in popularity at unparalleled speed and thrown all the traditional metrics of ‘success’ in the music industry into unfettered chaos.”<sup>27</sup> The “chaos” of these metrics is reflected in the *Billboard* charts, which indicate an explosion in the popularity of hip-hop singles in the last five years:

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hop-rap-music-streaming-2018/.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> It’s also notable that “Rock” music accounted for a considerable 44.2% of all physical music sales that year, while “R&B/Hip-Hop” was responsible for a mere 12.2%, according to the same study.

<sup>27</sup> Amy X Wang, “Drake Just Broke Another Streaming Record that Doesn’t Matter.” *Rolling Stone*. July 20, 2018.



**Hip Hop By The Numbers** @HipHopNumbers · Apr 11



2018: Hip-Hop had 43 Hot 100 top 10s

126.3% increase on 2017

53% higher than 2004 (28)

55% of 2018 Hot 100 top 10s were hip-hop, highest this decade

2010: 20%

2011: 30%

2012: 11%

2013: 16%

2014: 9%

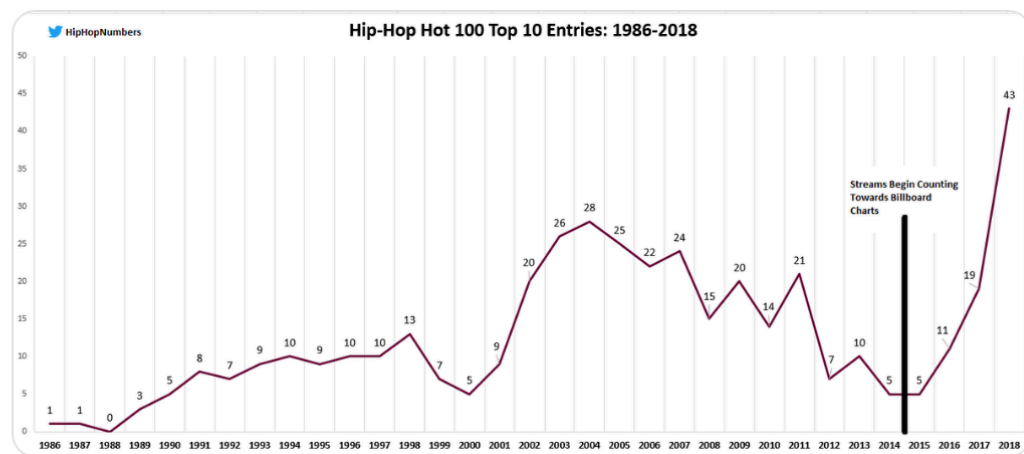
2015: 9%

2016: 19%

2017: 29%

2018: 55%

Is Hip-Hop now Pop?



28

Hip Hop By The Numbers' graph shows that hip-hop's dominance of the top 10 of Billboard Hot 100 chart has grown steadily since 2015, when 9 percent of the Top 10 songs were hip-hop. In

<sup>28</sup> *Hip Hop By The Numbers*. April 11, 2019. @HipHopNumbers.  
<https://twitter.com/HipHopNumbers/status/1116461678713950208>



2018, hip-hop's presence on the Top 10 increased by 126.3 percent from 2017, ultimately comprising 55 percent (over half!) of all *Billboard* Hot 100 Top 10 tracks that year.

Wang argues that the accuracy of the *Billboard* charts, long a subject of debate and concern,<sup>29</sup> has become even more questionable in recent years. She adds that the methods by which *Billboard* values streams as a measurement of success is "arbitrary," noting that charts weigh songs differently depending upon which platform the song was streamed.<sup>30</sup> If a song is streamed for free, for instance, it is worth less than when it is streamed on Spotify with a paid subscription. Nonetheless, the fact that "Hip-hop/R&B" is the most-streamed genre on the most popular form of music consumption does suggest some measure of market dominance that *Billboard* clearly values.

The rise of streaming services has also led to the rise of the playlist as a driving force of the current music market. Craig Marks of *Vulture* cited Spotify's "Rap Caviar" playlist as "the most influential playlist in music,"<sup>31</sup> claiming that "there are no more streamed, and therefore no more vital, artists in music than the new breed of hip-hop stars ... found in the upper reaches of RapCaviar and Apple's A-list: Hip-hop playlist."<sup>32</sup> Marks names Migos, Drake, Future, Cardi B, Lil Uzi Vert, and Rae Sremmurd as key artists helping make hip-hop the favoured genre among streamers.

The statistics point to a young consumer base – millennials – as the driving force behind the success of streaming services. *Forbes* reported in 2016 that millennials accounted for 72% of all

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<sup>29</sup> David Brackett, "The Politics and Practice of 'Crossover' in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965." *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 78 no. 4. 1994, p. 774-797.

<sup>30</sup> Wang, "Drake Just Broke Another Streaming Record that Doesn't Matter."

<sup>31</sup> Craig Marks, "How a Hit Rap Song Happens Now." *Vulture*. September 13, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

weekly streams on Spotify,<sup>33</sup> indicating the demographic's considerable power over the success of streaming services. A top label executive is quoted by *Vulture* as saying "Let's be honest, no cool kid is listening to top 40 radio.' Instead, those kids are glued to streaming services."<sup>34</sup> The increase in streaming service subscriptions has also rendered an increase in how much music people listen to on average, with *Business Insider* reporting a 26.79% increase in hours of music listened to per week between 2015 and 2017.<sup>35</sup> Because millennials make up such a large portion of streaming services' consumer base, it follows that they are consuming it at an unprecedented rate.

Some writers have argued that the dominance of streaming services has altered not only common modes of music consumption, but production as well. For example, Sam Wolfson posits in his *Guardian* article "We've got more money swirling around: how streaming saved the music industry" that streaming services such as Spotify have changed the way music is made in order to maximize audience attention. He argues that songs have gotten shorter, "to stop listeners skipping a track with a slow buildup."<sup>36</sup> Lyor Cohen, co-founder of 300 Entertainment and Global Head of Music for YouTube adds that streaming has also led to a lessened emphasis on "the album" in favour of simply releasing songs whenever possible: "Hip-hop artists have liberated themselves

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<sup>33</sup> Hugh McIntyre, "Millenials are Leading the Spotify Revolution," *Forbes* April 20, 2016

<sup>34</sup> Marks, "How a Hit Rap Song Happens Now."

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2016/04/20/millennials-are-leading-the-spotify-revolution/#2e22955b782c>.

<sup>35</sup> Caroline Cakebread, "Thanks to streaming, Americans are listening to more music than ever." *Business Insider*, Nov. 7, 2017. <https://www.businessinsider.in/thanks-to-streaming-americans-are-listening-to-more-music-than-ever-before/articleshow/61554653.cms>.

<sup>36</sup> Sam Wolfson, "We've got more money swirling around: how streaming saved the music industry." *The Guardian*. April 24, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/apr/24/weve-got-more-money-swirling-around-how-streaming-saved-the-music-industry>.

from the shackles of the album,” says hip-hop mogul Lyor Cohen, adding, “the album is far less important than just putting out music.”<sup>37</sup>

Considering the influence of streaming on both the consumption and production of music, Marks argues that the synergy between new hip-hop and streaming has been a powerful agent in reordering hierarchies within the pop landscape:

For a music industry still dominated by a handful of major labels, this profound synergy between hip-hop and streaming has upended business strategies, prompted high-profile bidding wars over new rap talent, devalued both emerging and A-list female pop singers, further hastened the commercial and cultural irrelevance of rock, prompted star EDM DJs like Calvin Harris to feature brand-name rappers on their latest tracks, and even challenged some longheld assumptions about race and music.<sup>38</sup>

As Marks suggests, this “synergy” between streaming services and new-school hip-hop has presented a reordering of many different hierarchies, including those of genre, culture, and race. The repercussions that Marks suggests will be further discussed in chapter three.

Here, I have illustrated some of the major facets of hip-hop’s current industry dominance. While the rise of streaming as the dominant mode of music consumption has thrown traditional metrics of commercial success into flux, the hip-hop genre has fared better than anyone else, as is evidenced by the exponential increase in its presence on the *Billboard* charts. In addition, the fact that “Hip-hop/R&B” is the most popular genre by a considerable margin on these streaming services reinforces its commercial hegemony. Ultimately, this shift in industry metrics as a result of hip-hop’s “synergy” with streaming services has resulted in the reordering of genre and cultural hierarchies, thus challenging “assumptions about race and music.”<sup>39</sup> This section served to provide

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<sup>37</sup> Marks, “How a Hit Rap Song Happens Now.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

a firmer grasp on hip-hop's commercial hegemony in order to provide context for the following historical analysis of hip-hop's rise.

## Literature Review

First, I will illustrate hip-hop's current hegemonic genre in the music industry with reference to several statistical reports and magazine articles. This will provide context for the following historical analysis of hip-hop's rise to mainstream dominance, beginning in section 1.2 in the 1980s.

Section 1.1 begins with discussion of "civil-rights-generation" politics during hip-hop's Golden Age. Much of Golden Age's politics stem from the politics of the civil-rights generation, which Nelson George argues was a unified social movement in the African-American community in the 1970s: "The thing that pulled this whole [black] community together ... was that despite their many and sometimes conflicting agendas, its members had a common desire to achieve equality under the law, end overt and covert racism, and acquire firm power both inside and outside their own circles."<sup>40</sup> He goes on to argue that the 1980s presented a decline in the prevalence of these politics, writing, "the real issue, in short, has been racial solidarity."<sup>41</sup> George's claims regarding the decline of "racial solidarity" will be further parsed in this section.

Considering George's discussion of the civil-rights generation as a political vehicle, it is evident that many scholars also point to the Golden Age as similarly political. Joshua Clover's *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About* positions hip-hop's "Golden Age"<sup>42</sup> as "the age

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<sup>40</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*. (New York: Penguin Group, 1988,) xi.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>42</sup> Clover considers this to range from the years 1986-1989.

of political confrontation along race and class lines.”<sup>43</sup> Clover and Tricia Rose, author of the seminal hip-hop text *Black Noise*, regard the Long Island group Public Enemy as the height of this political engagement during the Golden Age. Rose writes that Public Enemy offer an “especially rich and pleasurable”<sup>44</sup> cultural form “whereby oppositional transcripts are developed.”<sup>45</sup> Here, Rose associates oppositionality as an indicator of cultural “richness,” arguing that Public Enemy’s cultural power and, ultimately, value, is in large part a result of the resistant nature of their music.

Eric Weisbard provides an illuminating reading regarding African-American music as both a political vessel *and* a commercial product, writing that long before the civil-rights generation, musicians “sought culturally unifying but commercially viable music against ever mutating barriers.”<sup>46</sup> Public Enemy certainly embody these two ideologies; while they are lauded for their politics, they were equally valued for their ability to reach a mass audience. Similarly, Murray Forman contends in his book *The ‘Hood Comes First: Rap, Space, and Place in Hip-hop* that “‘getting paid’ or ‘making ends meet’ emerged as common themes in the discourses of ghetto life and were clearly audible even prior to the message-oriented rap”<sup>47</sup>. Thus, it is necessary to examine literature surrounding hip-hop’s rise not just as a political voice, but as a commercial product.

In *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige contends that as soon as subcultural products become commodified, they are subject to the demands of the mass market, writing, “Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who

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<sup>43</sup> Joshua Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*. (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2009,) 35.

<sup>44</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994,) 99.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>46</sup> Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014,) 31.

<sup>47</sup> Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop*. (Middletown (Connecticut): Wesleyan University Press, 2002,) 103.

produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise ... This occurs irrespective of the subculture's political orientation.<sup>48</sup> Hebdige's framework will inform the following inquiry into hip-hop's rise and crossover in the 1980s.

Nelson George's *Death of Rhythm & Blues* and *Hip-hop America* discuss the influence of Reaganomics on the African-American community in the 1980s. George writes, "The go-go capitalism of Reagan's America (and its corporate greed) flowed down to the streets stripped of its jingoistic patriotism and fake piety. The unfettered free market of crack generated millions and stoked a voracious appetite for 'goods,' not 'good'"<sup>49</sup>. Dmitri A. Bogazianos connects this newfound focus on "goods" to the rise of hip-hop as a commercial product. He writes,

During the early 1980s, when hip hop was becoming more popular and record labels got interested in trying to package the phenomenon, rappers became the most recognized and commercially important element in hip hop ... [rap could] be made with far less equipment, personnel, and, most important, investment capital.<sup>50</sup>

To understand this incorporation, Tamara Roberts's "Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream" provides a useful framework. Roberts argues that Michael Jackson's commercial reign in the 1980s forced mainstream music into a "racial no man's land,"<sup>51</sup> "an arena of racial confrontation and negotiation rather than the terrain of a singular musicoracial category."<sup>52</sup> The following examination of hip-hop's commercial crossover in the mid-1980s illuminate both Bogazianos and Roberts's arguments. A more detailed examination of hip-hop's crossover will reference works by Forman, Jeff Chang, Dan Charnas, and several others.

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<sup>48</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London: Routledge, 1981,) 96.

<sup>49</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Dimitri A. Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 60.

<sup>51</sup> Tamara Roberts, "Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (23, no. 1 2011. 19-39,) 36.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Christopher Holmes-Smith's "I Don't Like To Dream About Getting Paid" will then be referenced to frame the reordering of cultural hierarchies that develop at the moment of crossover. He writes that during times of "mass adoption," "power is somewhat up for grabs, and a semblance of freedom is more evident because the actual utility and value of precepts and goods are called into question."<sup>53</sup> Holmes-Smith's assertion will frame the following section, which examines the reordering of hierarchies that took place in hip-hop the late-1980s and early-1990s.

Murray Forman notes that because the late-80s and early-90s saw a marked increase in hip-hop's commercial success, there existed a growing concern that "industry interventions" were replacing "cultural traditions": "even as black music was reaching a commercial peak, it was perceived by many cultural critics as being in a morass, its cultural traditions threatened by industry interventions."<sup>54</sup> He goes on to write that this era saw the development of "competing conceptions" from various parties over which "expression of black identity should dominate."<sup>55</sup> Close analysis of these "competing conceptions" will frame further discussion of gangsta rap, which had become established as the dominant hip-hop expression in the early-90s.

Next, section 1.4 will examine some of the outside forces that shaped hip-hop's transformation in the early-1990s. Joshua Clover's *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This To Sing About* elucidates the ramifications of the U.S. legal system's assault on the practice of sampling in hip-hop<sup>56</sup>, a practice which, he notes, has long been associated with hip-hop's ability to uphold

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<sup>53</sup> Christopher Holmes-Smith, "'I Don't Like to Dream About Getting Paid': Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul" *Social Text* Vol. 21, no. 4, 2003: (69-97,) 74.

<sup>54</sup> Murray Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop*. Middletown (Connecticut): Wesleyan University Press, 2002,) 157-158.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 159

<sup>56</sup> Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*, 48.

socially progressive values.<sup>57</sup> This will be discussed further. In addition, Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar's *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* also details the public condemnation of gangsta rap by major U.S. political figures during this time.<sup>58</sup> Despite the culture wars waged on hip-hop during this time, however, hip-hop was experiencing a dramatic increase in commercial opportunity. Dan Charnas's *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop* will be used to illustrate the co-opting of hip-hop by major brands in the early-1990s – namely, Sprite.

Michael P. Jeffries's *Thug Life* and Dan Charnas's *The Big Payback* describe the turn of the millennium as another moment of increased incorporation of hip-hop. The second chapter examines the role of the hip-hop mogul in hip-hop's continued incorporation in the late-90s and early-2000s.

In section 2.1, Christopher Holmes-Smith's "I Don't Like To Dream About Getting Paid" will help to illustrate the complex, dual space that the hip-hop mogul occupies as both bearing the stamp of traditional American entrepreneurialism<sup>59</sup> while also being typically African-American, male, and "tethered either literally or symbolically to America's disenfranchised inner cities."<sup>60</sup> Leo Lowenthal's "The Triumph of Mass Idols" will serve to frame hip-hop moguls as both "idols of consumption" and "idols of production" within contemporary society.

The careers of Jay Z and Diddy as both African and American and as idols of both production and consumption suggest two types of duality. These dualities can be analyzed through the lens of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it, Du Bois argues that African-American

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Hip-hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. (Lawrence, Kan.: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2007,) 111.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Holmes-Smith, "'I Don't Like to Dream About Getting Paid': Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul," 69.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 69.



men must have a “double-consciousness” within American society: “One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; his two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”<sup>61</sup> This “double-consciousness” will inform further examination of the careers of Jay Z and Diddy as both active participants in mainstream capitalism and as proponents of Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth,” which argues for racial uplift for African-Americans in the form of economic empowerment.<sup>62</sup>

Discussion of Du Bois, Jay Z and Diddy will serve as a point of contrast for section 2.2, which discusses Southern hip-hop moguls (mainly Birdman and Master P). With reference to Ben Westhoff’s *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop* as well as a variety of journalistic articles, it will become evident that Southern moguldom runs counter to the upward aspiration of Jay Z and Diddy. These works also illustrate the increased mainstream prevalence of Southern hip-hop, which is the subject of the next section.

Section 2.3’s discussion of Southern hip-hop begins with Lil Jon, who, as Westhoff notes, was integral to the popularization of Southern “crunk” music. Westhoff notes the stylistic difference between crunk and previously dominant hip-hop styles, writing, “Jon had decided that rhyming couplets, verses, and other fancy-shmancy rap elements were filler, and that what listeners really desired were short catchphrases shouted ad nauseum.”<sup>63</sup> Additionally, in his article “The Return of Lil Jon and Why It’s No Surprise,” Max Weinstein describes Lil Jon’s substantial influence on the sound of subsequent mainstream hip-hop. He writes, The more you think about

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<sup>61</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2007,) 2-3.

<sup>62</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth.” In *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington (Simon and Schuster, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Ben Westhoff, *Dirty South: Outkast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011,) 179.

it, the more it seems that post-millennium southern rap in its entirety owes its lineage to Lil Jon.” Though crunk receded by the mid-2000s, Lil Jon’s influence proved central to the sound of another Southern hip-hop form: trap music. Trap music is the subject of the next section.

Section 2.4 will examine contemporary literature on trap music. Though it is a rather new genre, Dimitri A. Bogazianos’s book *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs* and Justin Adams Burton’s book *Posthuman Rap* are valuable resources and prove central to my examination of trap music. Bogazianos connects trap music with the “grind” of the crack era: “Grinding ... reflects a specific crack-era hustle that is inseparable from the period’s most devastating effects.”<sup>64</sup> Justin Adams Burton’s 2017 book *Posthuman Rap* also serves as a crucial resource for my examination of trap music. Burton argues that, as opposed to the upward narrative seen with artists such as Jay Z, the ideology of the trap is a more circular one: “Trap, then, evokes a grind similar to that of previous eras of rap, but instead of grinding one’s way to the top, increasing one’s social and political capital as the money piles up, trap stays in the trap”<sup>65</sup>. Ultimately, Burton argues that trap music operates under its own market logic that is audible in the music itself: “it defies neoliberal market logic by investing in the impurities of criminality, diluted products, and sonic blackness.”<sup>66</sup> Burton’s claims will be closely examined in this section.

Burton and Bogazianos’ elucidation of “trap” will provide context for section 2.5, which is dedicated to the analysis of Migos’ 2013 song “Versace” and its accompanying music video. In addition, I draw again on Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* and *The Talented Tenth* to provide further insight into “Versace” and Migos. Bogazianos and Burton’s illustration of the trap, in combination

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<sup>64</sup> Dimitri A. Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012,) 55

<sup>65</sup> Justin Adams Burton, *Posthuman Rap*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017,) 195.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

with my application of Du Bois, will provide the groundwork for my argument that Migos embody both the circular market logic of the trap and the upward aspiration of hip-hop moguls such as Jay Z and Diddy. Furthermore, this dual embodiment reinforces Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness.

Furthering my analysis of "Versace," I turn to the song's music video in section 2.6 to examine Migos' performance of gender roles. Drawing from Gwendolyn Pough's *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* and Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, I conclude that Migos embody the "badman" trope, which, as Perry notes, is a response to white patriarchal oppression.<sup>67</sup> Though Migos' embodiment of the "badman" empowers Migos and their performance of hypermasculinity, this empowerment ultimately relies on the subordination of women to a limited and oppressed gender role.

Using the conspicuous consumption found in "Versace" as a signpost, chapter 3 begins by analyzing the culture of materialism and conspicuous consumption in hip-hop. I begin by drawing upon the article "Materialism, Conspicuous Consumption and American Hip-Hop Subculture" by Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Susan A. Andrzejewski, and James M. Hunt, who raise concerns regarding the negative ramifications of conspicuous consumption in the African-American community such as consumer debt, social anxiety, compulsive buying, and family-related stress<sup>68</sup>. They write:

the [African-American] community, like others, faces potential overspending on conspicuous items and consumer debt ... The concern, of course, is that this continued focus on status and attainment of possessions can also come with negative

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<sup>67</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006,) 111.

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Susan A. Andrzejewski, and James M. Hunt, "Materialism, Conspicuous Consumption and American Hip-Hop Subculture." *The Sustainable Global Marketplace*, (2014, 25,) 278-279.

outcomes related to social anxiety (Schroeder and Dugal 1995), compulsive buying (Roberts, Manolis, and Tanner 2003), and family-related stress (Roberts, Manolis, and Tanner 2006).<sup>69</sup>

With this criticism in mind, I will then further discuss the role of materialism and conspicuous consumption in hip-hop in a historical context. To frame this, I begin section 3.2 by using Max Weber's *Social Stratification and Power* and Thorstien Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* to illuminate the relationship between the ownership of property, the consumption of goods, and social status.

Section 3.3 uses the framework established in 3.2 to analyze contemporary discourse on conspicuous consumption in African-American culture, including Michael P. Jeffries's *Thug Life: Race, Gender and the Meaning of Hip-hop*, which argues that the emphasis on conspicuous consumption found in lower-class Black communities is a "coping strategy" in response to African-Americans' "traditional paths to positive self-image, and self-and social esteem."<sup>70</sup> I also use Hank Willis Thomas's essay "Black Cool" from the collection *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* to further illustrate Jeffries's argument. Next, I invoke Roopali Mukherjee's article "The Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic in Contemporary Culture." In it, Mukherjee argues that claim that Black ownership of luxury items is an act of resistance as it "disrupts the racial exclusivity of white access to luxury, wealth, and consumerist excess."<sup>71</sup> These texts will frame my following argument that hip-hop artists make similar disruptions of hierarchies through conspicuous consumption. I will reinforce this argument with reference to Sarah Banet-Weiser's

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 278-279.

<sup>70</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-hop*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011,) 71.

<sup>71</sup> Roopali Mukherjee, "The Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic in Contemporary Black Culture" *Cultural Studies* (Vol. 20, No. 6 November 2006, pp. 599-629,) 612-13.

*Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*, in which she argues that power struggle between “emergent modes of creativity” (such as hip-hop, in this case) and the demands of the brand culture of the “mass market” is in fact an integral part of authentic expression in contemporary culture.

Section 3.4 examines the widespread criticism that new-school hip-hop has faced in recent years for its heightened degree of conspicuous consumption. Reference is made to several reviews, including those from *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, as well as Kris Singh and Dale Tracy’s article “Assuming Niceness: private and public relationships in Drake’s *Nothing Was The Same*,” in which they ask, “if rappers are all talking about their ‘money’, ‘bitches’ and ‘swag’, how do they access core emotions with which fans can connect?”<sup>72</sup> In addition, Wu-Tang Clan member GZA’s open letter “The Lost Art of Lyricism” asks, “what can I get from talking about my car? It’s irrelevant.”<sup>73</sup>

In the next section, 3.5, I offer a counter to this criticism. I suggest that new-school hip-hop can better be understood not as a “lost art” but rather as a modern iteration of the punk tradition of authenticity through differentiation. I use Keir Keightley’s article “Reconsidering Rock,” Lawrence Grossberg’s article “Is There Rock after Punk?” and Ryan Moore’s book *Sells Like Teen Spirit* to examine punk’s development in the 1970s as a product of the by-then-fragmented “rock” genre. These texts position punk music as a rejection of rock tradition, with Keightley writing, ““In the 1970s, punk was seen as the antithesis of rock, a mortal enemy intent on destroying rock

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<sup>72</sup> Kris Singh and Dale Tracy, “Assuming Niceness: private and public relationships in Drake’s *Nothing Was The Same*” *Popular Music* (Vol. 34, No. 1 2015, pp. 94-112,) 103.

<sup>73</sup> GZA, “The Lost Art of Lyricism.” *Medium*. May 27, 2015. <https://medium.com/cuepoint/gza-speaks-the-lost-art-of-lyricism-ee84510e7268>.

culture.”<sup>74</sup> Keightley argues, however, that though punk was perceived as the antithesis of rock culture, it was in the end *continuing* the rock tradition of authenticity through differentiation: “punk music was simply fulfilling rock’s traditional investment in differentiation and authenticity, distinguishing itself from the rock mainstream.”<sup>75</sup> This idea contextualizes the following section, which delves into the increasingly popular sentiment that hip-hop is “the new rock & roll.” Following this, Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* as well as Richard Dyer’s “Entertainment and Utopia” prove useful in examining the relationship between social need and audience taste. These works serve to illuminate discussion of the social needs that new-school hip-hop fulfill as the “new rock & roll.”

Section 3.6 uses articles from *Rolling Stone* and *Complex* to study the influence of trap music on Top 40 radio and on pop artists such as Justin Bieber, Lana Del Rey, and Ariana Grande. Jason Toynbee’s chapter “Genre Cultures” from his book *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* will be referenced here. Toynbee offers insight that differs some from Banet-Weiser’s, as he raises concerns regarding appropriation and the perceived sacrifice of cultural authenticity:

Marketing a genre beyond its home territory may subvert the original context of production as musicians learn to please a new and diffuse audience ... authentic sounds may be appropriated by musicians from outside and refashioned in a profoundly inauthentic way.<sup>76</sup>

Offset’s *Hot Ones* interview, however, suggests a less worrisome view than Toynbee’s; discussion of this interview will conclude the section.

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<sup>74</sup> Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock” In *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, edited by Simon Frith and Will Straw. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 109-42,) 138.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>76</sup> Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*. (London; New York: Arnold, 2000,) 116.

3.7, the last section, uses the writings of Stuart Hall's lecture *Race: The Floating Signifier* as the basis for my final argument. In the lecture, he elucidates the race-based assumptions that at times inform modern discourse of African-Americans and Black art:

a certain kind of politics ... defends the [African] race, tries to protect us against discrimination, etcetera, in which all black people will be figured as people who are holding the correct position. And when you ask what positions do they hold what you will respond is not the normal political argument: "well they believe in the following things which I think are viable and progressive things for black people to vie for now in order to change their circumstances."<sup>77</sup>

Using Hall's framework, I argue that it is problematic to make value judgements on hip-hop music based on whether or not it fulfills a certain explicit politics, as these judgements often rely on race-based assumptions like the one Hall describes above. Instead, invoking Charnas, I argue that the mere fact of hip-hop's "remixing" is indicative of hip-hop and new-school hip-hop's success at reordering social hierarchies, thereby authenticating its position within hip-hop tradition.

## **Methodology**

This project was first driven by the concept of hip-hop as both the most popular genre in the United States and as "the new rock & roll," as Kanye West and others have iterated. After preliminary research, it became clear that hip-hop's ascent to hegemony could be tracked in large part by "following the money," such as business deals, corporate sponsorships, chart positions, sales figures, etc. From here, I focused on literature that would allow me to chronologically track hip-hop's rise in the context of the business deals and other economic forces that have fueled it.

Much of the literature used in this research discusses the ever-present conflict in hip-hop

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<sup>77</sup> Stuart Hall, "Race: The Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall." YouTube video. *BlackOups*. June 25, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtkTkdiF5ZY>.

between hip-hop as a pure cultural expression and hip-hop as a commercial product. This deliberation guided my exploration of older sociological texts regarding the roles of production and consumption in Western society, the incorporation of subcultures into the mainstream, and the social forces that contribute to audience taste. Inquiry into hip-hop literature, in tandem with these more established sociological texts, allowed me to frame my discussion of Migos and new-school hip-hop.

I chose Migos and their song “Versace” as a primary focus of my discussion of new-school hip-hop for several reasons. First, at the time of this project’s conception, Migos were fresh off the release of their highly-anticipated sophomore album *CULTURE II*. Additionally, their trademark “Migos flow” or “triplet-flow”,<sup>78</sup> has arguably been the most influential style of vocal delivery of the past six years, as numerous hip-hop and non-hip-hop artists continue to adopt and adapt it. “Versace” was the song that kicked off the rise of the “triplet-flow,” a then-novel style of rap delivery that, as we will see, has since become central to the sound of current hip-hop. Third, since their mainstream crossover, members of Migos have appeared on myriad releases by major pop stars, such as Calvin Harris’s “Slide” and Katy Perry’s “Bon Appétit.” Furthermore, “Versace” embodies the conspicuous consumption in hip-hop that has been the source of so much disdain from music critics. Finally, their influence on broader culture is undeniable (for example, Hillary Clinton doing the Migos “dab” dance on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* during her campaign for Democratic nominee). I chose the song “Versace” because it can be seen as a signpost pointing towards trap music’s subsequent ascent in the following years. Over the course of this thesis, I also draw on a range of contemporary journalism and music reporting to illuminate my discussion.

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<sup>78</sup> This will be further examined in section 2.5.



## Chapter 1: Reading the “Golden Age” as Political and Commercial

In order to better understand new-school hip-hop’s currently dominant position within the music industry, we must go back to the 1980s and then chronologically examine hip-hop’s ascent. What follows is a historical analysis of hip-hop music’s rise starting in the 1980s through to its dominant position in 2019. Chapter 1 will examine hip-hop’s mainstream crossover in the mid-1980s, thus analyzing its position as both a political vehicle *and* commercial product during the “Golden Age.”

### 1.1 The Golden Age

The “Golden Age,” commonly considered to be the years from 1986-1989,<sup>79</sup> is often discussed as the moment when hip-hop was most unified as a social and political movement. Public Enemy, especially, is widely regarded as the embodiment of the era’s intensified political awareness. While Public Enemy’s Chuck D and Flava Flav were certainly outspoken in their politics, I argue that their prominence and success as hip-hop’s political figureheads was also tied to the success of those who were less interested in hip-hop as a political tool but in marketing it as a commercial *product*. That is to say, the wider circulation of such politically-conscious hip hop has long been inextricable from the wider circulation of hip hop as a saleable commodity. Upon closer inspection it becomes clear that hip-hop’s rise to mainstream prominence in the late-1980s was also fueled by the desire from various parties to “get paid,” as hip-hop’s commercial potential had by then become undeniable. In addition, while Public Enemy are most associated with the idea of Golden Age hip-hop as a social movement, the simultaneous mainstream presence of artists such as Eric B. and Rakim, EPMD, and Big Daddy Kane suggests a more diverse composition of the hip-hop

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<sup>79</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, 41.

landscape during this time. Eric B. and Rakim's classic 1987 album *Paid In Full* is especially significant here. Considering the album's unconcealed investment in the idea of "getting paid," it is clear that some Golden Age hip-hop was more focused on economic individualism rather than political protest. Despite this, much of hip-hop music's perceived value rests on the idea that for hip-hop to be good, it has to be authentic, and for it to be authentic, it has to fulfill its alleged potential as a political vehicle.

This attitude regarding hip-hop's political potential can be traced to older discourses surrounding the "civil rights generation" of black 1970s R&B music. In his book *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, scholar Nelson George describes a collective sociopolitical interest that comprised the "essence" of R&B music post-WWII:

The thing that pulled this whole [black] community together, at least for a time, was that despite their many and sometimes conflicting agendas, its members had a common desire to achieve equality under the law, end overt and covert racism, and acquire firm power both inside and outside their own circles. On these points the black community stood united.<sup>80</sup>

George goes on to argue that despite the perceived unity of the "civil-rights generation" (and perhaps in part because of the movement's relative success) in the 1970s, black political action experienced a decline by the next decade:

It strikes me that the real story of blacks in the eighties is not about a quest for political access. Instead, the community has had to confront deep internal tensions over income disparity and the accountability of leaders to the grass roots. The real issue, in short, has been racial solidarity.<sup>81</sup>

This dichotomy between the perceived political unity of the civil-rights generation and the "internal tensions" of "blacks in the eighties" proves to be one of the key points of discussion of hip-

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<sup>80</sup> Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, xi.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

hop in the 1980s. Contrasting his discussion of R&B as the music of a unified front, George acknowledges that hip-hop was never unified in its political inclinations. Instead, he suggests that the “movement” of hip-hop has always been multidimensional and fluid: “Hip-hop is not a political movement in the usual sense. Its advocates don’t elect public officials. It doesn’t present a systematic (or even original) critique of white world supremacy. Not has it produced a manifesto for collective political agitation.”<sup>82</sup> Notwithstanding George’s acknowledgement that hip-hop is “not a political movement in the usual sense,” the following analysis of critical discourse regarding Golden Age hip-hop will contend that hip-hop has long been measured by whether or not it fulfills or is perceived to fulfill the political goals of the civil-rights generation.

Joshua Clover reiterates the view that hip-hop’s Golden Age was the golden age of political activism in hip-hop: “The genre’s high era is continuous with the rise of Black Power and Black Nationalism; the Golden Era of hip-hop is none other than the age of political confrontation along race and class lines.”<sup>83</sup> Rose similarly describes this era as the inheritor of a long history of black social criticism: “Rap’s timely dialogical quality is situated in the current configuration of the means of production and distribution as well as in the history of black social criticism.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, Golden Age hip-hop artists such as Public Enemy are often celebrated for their alignment with civil-rights politics. In his book *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, Joshua Clover asserts that Public Enemy’s outspoken politics made them a hip-hop force in the late-1980s, claiming that they were “both the figures and figureheads par excellence for hip-hop’s political

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<sup>82</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 155.

<sup>83</sup> Clover, *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, 35.

<sup>84</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994,) 123.

turn.”<sup>85</sup> noting the group’s “deftness at addressing overlapping but varied audiences.”<sup>86</sup> In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose writes, “Public Enemy’s prophet of rage, Chuck D, keeps poor folks alert and prevents them from being lulled into submission by placating and misleading media stories and official ‘truths.’ He holds the microphone with a vice grip and protects it from perpetrators of false truths, speaking directly to the poor.” For critics, scholars, and those within the hip-hop community, the music of Public Enemy came to be seen as the most authentic iteration of hip-hop. While discussing Public Enemy, Rose writes, “these cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the ‘unofficial truths’ are developed, refined, and rehearsed.”<sup>87</sup> These readings of “Golden Era” hip-hop – which Clover notes is usually considered to run from 1986 to 1989<sup>88</sup> – illustrate the widespread notion that hip-hop music is at its best when it meets certain standards of social consciousness and political activism, which, as we will see, are rooted in the perceived political engagement of the “civil-rights generation.”

It is commonplace to make value judgements on hip-hop based on whether or not they fulfill these political priorities; indeed, as will be discussed later, this has been the framework from which many rap critics are able to voice their disdain for new-school hip-hop. In the foreword of Kenji Jasper and Ytasha Womack’s 2007 book *Beats, Rhymes, and Life*, Michael E. Dyson argues that because hip-hop’s politics do not always align with those of the “civil rights generation,” hip-hop artists are misguided:

When I think about the hip-hop generation’s obsession with materialism, it is true that this is an index of some of the failures of the civil rights generation to transmit some of its values. It’s not necessarily the response of the hip-hop generation to learn them. But it is the responsibility of this generation to develop an astute political

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<sup>85</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, 31.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>87</sup> Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 99.

<sup>88</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, 34.

impulse that allows it to understand that the pursuit of wealth is not necessarily the sign of success.<sup>89</sup>

Dyson's text suggests that the aspiration toward personal material wealth pursued by some members of the hip-hop community is inauthentic, as it can too often subordinate the more socially conscious aspirations of "real," or authentic, hip-hop that Golden Age is seen to have epitomized. Dyson claims that artists must be made aware of their place as a political entity, arguing that they should reflect this in their music: "You have to begin to consciencize [sic] your generation and force it to see that you don't want to just make records, you want to record your existence in a political form that makes a difference for the money makers and power shakers in America."<sup>90</sup> For Dyson, political awareness is something to be reclaimed in hip-hop, as opposed to "just making records."

There are, however, problems with this narrative. In *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, Eric Weisbard argues that though the "civil-rights generation" of African-American music may have at times sought political unification, African-Americans long before "sought culturally unifying *but commercially viable music* against ever mutating barriers"<sup>91</sup> (emphasis added). Here, Weisbard suggests a tension between "culturally unifying" and "commercially viable" music, pointing to a co-existence that will prove central to the discussion of hip-hop's ascent towards industry dominance. In addition, Weisbard argues that the commercial aspect of African-American popular music has been ignored in music discourse. As he writes, "History recast black music in other ways: the civil rights pinnacle celebrated in soul, the depoliticized sounds of disco, the postindustrial critique of racial uplift delivered by hip-hop."<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Beats, Rhymes & Life: What We Love and Hate about Hip-hop*. (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2007), 23.

<sup>90</sup> Dyson, *Beats, Rhymes & Life: What We Love and Hate about Hip-hop*. (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2007,) 30

<sup>91</sup> Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, 31.

<sup>92</sup> Dyson, *Beats, Rhymes & Life: What We Love and Hate about Hip-hop*, 32.

Counter to what Dyson suggests, and in accordance with Weisbard's argument advocating for an understanding of Black music's evolution as both a political vehicle *and* a commercially-driven enterprise, I posit that the juxtaposition of early civil rights generation-minded hip-hop and the ostensibly apolitical new-school in critical discourse is misleading. Instead, I argue that it is useful to examine the rise of hip-hop music as a commercial product *as well as* an at times political vehicle. Indeed, it will become evident that the values of Golden Age hip-hop were, like any other era, contingent on a variety of external factors that were not directly influenced by the politics of the civil-rights generation.

It is true that Public Enemy is often discussed as being synonymous with the Golden Age, as their political motivations were essential to their identity as Public Enemy. Similarly, N.W.A.'s brazen outrage is perceived to be particularly potent from a Black Power standpoint. But during that time, there was also Eric B. and Rakim's *Paid In Full*, EPMD's *Strictly Business*, and Big Daddy Kane's *Long Live The Kane*, all "classic" albums from the era that do not particularly share the specific sentiments of Public Enemy and N.W.A. Eric B. and Rakim, EPMD, and Big Daddy Kane instead offer various images of opulence, either on their album covers, in their songs, or both. The Golden Age certainly offered its share of politically outspoken artists, but they do not tell the entire story of the era. Many scholars have noted that political action was never a foundational aspect of hip-hop culture in the first place;<sup>93</sup> Murray Forman notes in *The Hood Comes First* that the concept of "getting paid" in hip-hop actually preceded that of the conscious or political, writing that "'getting paid' or 'making ends meet' emerged as common themes in the discourses of ghetto life and were clearly audible even prior to the message-oriented rap"<sup>94</sup>. While

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<sup>93</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-hop*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011,) 12.

<sup>94</sup> Forman, *The Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-hop*, 103.

the power and influence of message-driven hip-hop is not to be understated, it makes equal sense to analyze hip-hop's rise to dominance not simply as a sociopolitical movement but also as a cultural entity that has long been inseparable from the demands of capitalism. What follows is a discussion of key moments in the development, rise, and mainstreaming of hip-hop in U.S. society. This will serve to better understand hip-hop not simply as a political voice but as a product of the economic circumstances surrounding it. It will become clear that hip-hop music's constant transformation has presented alternate criteria for hip-hop "authenticity" that do not necessitate political engagement.

Much of hip-hop's Golden Age is certainly the music of confrontation, and has shown that hip-hop can be a powerful vessel for political activism and social change. But it will become apparent this confrontation was voiced in many different ways, leading us to the conclusion that because hip-hop's invested parties were so diverse, there was no single driving "goal" or specific set of politics behind this music. New-school hip-hop's heightened degree of emphasis on financial gain and conspicuous consumption is often seen by critics as a rejection of the widely held view that hip-hop is at its best when it is a vessel for social change. However, I argue that positioning new-school hip-hop against the political rap of Public Enemy and N.W.A. or the current, conscious rap of Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole as the ultimate criterion for judgement does not tell the whole story. The relationship between political and conscious hip-hop and new-school swag rap is more intricate than it may appear and deserves to be discussed as the result of various forces working for, against, or not at all towards hip-hop's growth as a political tool. Invoking Raymond Williams's 1970 book *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, Dimitri Bogazianos writes that, contrary to perceptions of hip-hop as a vessel for a specific politics, hip-hop music is rather

a complex, often contradictory, commercially bound social practice that cannot be reduced to its political potential or violent excesses, which are often taken,

simplistically, by both academic and popular critics, to be its ‘good’ and ‘bad’ qualities. When approached as a complex social practice, rap can be seen less as a reflection of social forces, and more as ‘a transformation and innovation which composed a generation out of what seemed separate work and experience,’ bringing ‘in new feelings, people relationships; rhythms newly known, discovered, articulated; defining the society rather than merely reflecting it’<sup>95</sup>

Rather than viewing new-school hip-hop artists as the harbingers of inauthentic hip-hop expression, hip-hop is, and has always been, a vital response to ever-changing cultural, political, and economic situations. The heightened focus on materialism, bling, and conspicuous consumption that has defined new-school hip-hop in recent years is better understood as a result of a great many moving parts that, deliberately or not, shifted hip-hop music toward its now-hegemonic position.

To gain this understanding, it is first important to establish a framework for the “crossover” that hip-hop underwent in the mid-1980s. In her article “Michael Jackson’s Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream,” Tamara Roberts examines Michael Jackson’s influence on racial demarcation in the mainstream. Roberts argues that Jackson’s music signified a “blending” of styles commonly considered “black” and “white,” creating new avenues of (inter)racial expression for the subsequent mainstream. She adds that the tensions that Jackson’s music highlighted produced new understandings of race in popular music:

His music transcends the racialized categories that drive the music industry, blending styles historically labeled black and white into an interracial formation. At the same time, his music features heightened and static images of race that serve as currency within the industry and foils to his hybrid base. The Jackson-influenced mainstream, then, is both progressive and regressive—and the conversation between these two political poles. Popular music is the culture this tension produces, pointing the path toward new ways of hearing race in the twenty-first century while providing the very tools to resist this transcendence.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, 10.

<sup>96</sup> Tamara Roberts, "Michael Jackson’s Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23, no. 1 (2011), 36.



What has resulted, Roberts contends, is a mainstream that she describes as a “no man’s land” comprised of “racial negotiation” rather than distinct racial categories. She writes that post-Jackson, the mainstream became “an arena of racial confrontation and negotiation rather than the terrain of a singular musicoracial category. In reality, it is less a “stream” than a zone, a discursive no man’s land between categories that relies on those very categories for its makeup.”<sup>97</sup> After the following discussion of hip-hop’s crossover in the mid-1980s, it will become clear that its mainstream incorporation<sup>98</sup> furthered this racial negotiation, resulting in a reordering of dominant hip-hop.

## 1.2 Reaganomics and “getting paid”

Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* provides a useful theoretical framework here regarding the incorporation of subcultures into the commercial mainstream. Hebdige argues that as subcultures become commodified and removed from their “private contexts,” they must, by necessity, develop new “sets of conventions” to adapt to the public commercial sphere (italics my own):

as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. In this way, the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the ‘real’/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form. Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones ... *This occurs irrespective of the subculture’s political orientation*<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>98</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 96.

Hebdige's contention helps to frame the following discussion of hip-hop's development from a subculture to a mainstream commercial force in the mid-1980s. His claim that subcultures must inevitably adapt their conventions to the demands of the mass market regardless of their political orientation is also important to keep in mind. Hip-hop's mainstream incorporation in the mid-1980s and through the 1990s illustrates Hebdige's argument whereby both "ideological" and "commercial" incorporation converged (and often conflicted). As a result, hip-hop's incorporation established new conventions, new worldviews, and, ultimately, new and numerous attitudes regarding hip-hop authenticity.

This convergence is evident in some hip-hop music of the 1980s and will become even more apparent in our later exploration of the gangsta rap of the early-1990s. Many scholars cite Ronald Reagan's presidency as a major influence on hip-hop's relationship with capitalism in the 1980s. In *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, Nelson George elucidates the effects of Ronald Reagan's presidency on lower-class, black communities in the United States:

"Reaganomics ... just stone cold stopped black progress in this country. For the first time since the New Deal, the government, including Congress and the Supreme Court, didn't support the civil-rights agenda and, in fact, did much to dismantle the laws on the books and encourage a resurgence of racism (George 171).<sup>100</sup>

Along with the economic turmoil George describes, he also details in particular the widespread effects of crack cocaine on poor black communities in the 1980s:

During the eight years of Reagan's presidency, the ripple effect of crack flowed through all the social service agencies of our country ... As a consequence for many, materialism replaced spirituality as the definer of life's worth ... The go-go capitalism of Reagan's America (and its corporate greed) flowed down to the streets stripped of its jingoistic patriotism and fake piety. The unfettered free market of crack generated millions and stoked a voracious appetite for 'goods,' not 'good'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> George, *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*, 171.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 41.

George's elucidation of the newfound focus on material goods over ethical imperatives is especially important here. In 1986, in the middle of the Reagan era, unemployment among black teens in America was as high as 43.7 percent.<sup>102</sup> Forman points out that at this precise moment, hip-hop had begun to become recognized as an alternate method for accruing income. As it moved from, as Forman puts it, "the street corners and parks into the clubs and studios,"<sup>103</sup> hip-hop culture "experienced its own micro-version of economic restructuring."<sup>104</sup> Bogazianos also asserts a connection between economics, music and origin, arguing that there is a relationship between the distribution of crack cocaine and the distribution of hip-hop as a commercial product:

During the early 1980s, when hip hop was becoming more popular and record labels got interested in trying to package the phenomenon, rappers became the most recognized and commercially important element in hip hop ... Rap ... was seen as a far easier element [of hip hop] to package since it could be condensed into a song, recorded, and sold in smaller 'units.' Much like crack, which arrived soon after, rap was often viewed as a 'fast food' version of popular music since it could – like cocaine cooking on a kitchen stove – be made with far less equipment, personnel, and, most important, investment capital.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, hip-hop's crossover in the 1980s points to a heightened level of incorporation that had not been present in its earlier stages as a subculture. One instance of hip-hop's "go-go capitalism"<sup>106</sup> is particularly telling. In 1983, a tall, blond Swiss émigré Charlie Stettler and his then-girlfriend Lynda West secured the first corporate sponsorship deal in hip-hop history by hosting a breakdance and rap contest at a local New York City nightclub.<sup>107</sup> Stettler approached an executive named Charles Warfield at the radio station WBLS, who offered Stettler free airtime if he could find a corporate sponsor for the event. Warfield directed them to an executive at Coca-Cola named James

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<sup>102</sup> Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Rap, Space, and Place in Hip-Hop*, 105.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>105</sup> Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, 60.

<sup>106</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 41.

<sup>107</sup> Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop*. (New York, NY: New American Library, 2011,) 100.

Patton, who quickly accepted the deal and suggested a larger venue for the event. So, after contributing \$150,000, Coca-Cola sponsored a free hip-hop event at New York's Radio City Music Hall, promoting it by attaching promotional messages on thousands of individual Coke bottles.<sup>108</sup> The event was a massive success, and the winners, a group called Disco 3, would later become famous as the Fat Boys. In the audience was an aspiring hip-hop businessman named Russell Simmons. After the success of their Kurtis Blow-produced single (Blow was managed by Simmons) entitled "Fat Boys," the Disco 3 then changed their moniker to the title of their single. This business move elevated the Fat Boys to the echelon of the Simmons-managed Blow and Run-DMC.

This event is important because it indicates that there were already multiple invested parties in the mix during the formative years of hip-hop's involvement in corporate sponsorship, and none of them seemed particularly interested in using the event as a vehicle for any type of unified political statement or promotion of black advancement. Second, Yes, Stettler's press release for the event thanks Coca-Cola for letting "underprivileged ghetto kids"<sup>109</sup> occupy a space previously reserved for less rebellious (read: white) performers and audiences, a move which carries with it various connotations of "claiming space" for the black underclass. But press release aside, it is clear that an at least equal motivator for those hosting the event was to get paid. The success of Stettler's event, backed by substantial economic capital (vis-à-vis Coca-Cola in this case) granted Stettler credibility, helped take the Fat Boys off the streets of Brooklyn, and added one more soon-to-be commercially successful hip-hop act to Simmons's collection.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 100.

In 1984, hip-hop's journey toward the mainstream was channeled largely by producer-moguls Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin. Both highly ambitious young men, they found success after producing and releasing their debut single, LL Cool J's hit "I Need a Beat" in 1984 under their fledgling label Def Jam.<sup>110</sup> The song sold 100,000 copies within a few months, which, as journalist Dan Charnas notes, was a fairly substantial amount for a rap record lacking the backing of one of the period's six major record labels.<sup>111</sup> By September of 1985, Columbia, which was owned by CBS, signed Def Jam to a \$2 million production deal.<sup>112</sup> Charnas writes that the deal was far from generous, with Columbia owning the rights to the master recordings and 86 percent of the royalties.<sup>113</sup> But still, Charnas writes, "it was the first deal of a magnitude that made a rap label a clear priority for a major company."<sup>114</sup> Though this was a relatively minor step for hip-hop culture, it pointed to the subsequent trend of corporate sponsorship of hip-hop music that has only become increasingly ubiquitous since.

Forman also implies that though hip-hop is a vital form of black cultural expression, he claims that independent labels during this time sought to advance themselves primarily by finding artists who could sell records (*italics my own*):

Seeking to reinforce their positions in the market, most of the more prominent black independent labels were at this stage all attempting to establish deeper rosters of hip-hop artists whose careers could be nurtured and extended and *who could deliver consistent sales over an extended period*.<sup>115</sup>

Forman writes that prior to hip-hop's corporate sponsorship, homemade pirate cassettes had been one of the primary means of distribution of hip-hop recordings, though this changed after major

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>115</sup> Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, 149.

labels both simplified and expanded the means of rap music's distribution. Forman argues that this change in the genre's market structure was an element of hip-hop's crossover as well. By adopting this method of production and distribution, hip-hop music's reach was expanded. Hip-hop was no longer a localized enterprise, as some of its biggest stars were now able to reach a national audience.

By 1985, as Forman notes, two of hip-hop's premier indie labels – Tommy Boy and Def Jam – had signed “lucrative”<sup>116</sup> deals with Warner Brothers and Columbia respectively, “guaranteeing them access to substantially increased promotional budgets and broader distribution networks.”<sup>117</sup> Artists who were well-known in their local area were exposed to a much wider audience, and local audiences were presented with a more geographically diverse assortment of hip-hop acts. This restructuring is significant, as it further indicates hip-hop music's deep imbrication in the goals of capitalism at the time of its crossover.

Jeff Chang notes that by the end of 1986, Russell Simmons, Rick Rubin, and Bill Stephney managed to sell black rappers Run-D.M.C. to white audiences and white rappers Beastie Boys to black audiences.<sup>118</sup> “The Black group crossed over to white audiences with *Raising Hell*, then the white group crossed over to Black audiences with *License to Ill*.”<sup>119</sup> In 1987, *License to Ill* became the first ever hip-hop album to hit number one on the *Billboard* charts,<sup>120</sup> spending seven weeks there and was certified platinum on February 2<sup>nd</sup> of the same year. From 1989 onward, at least one hip-hop album would hit number one every year.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>118</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't stop, won't stop: a history of the hip-hop generation*. (New York: St. Martin's Press 2005,) 260.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>120</sup> Jason Newman, “A Comprehensive Look at Every #1 Rap Album.” *Fuse.tv*.  
<https://www.fuse.tv/2012/03/comprehensive-look-every-number-one-rap-album>.

David Brackett offers the proviso that the *Billboard* charts do not necessarily provide an accurate representation of audience taste: “The charts may be a fiction that we use, like public opinion polls, to convince ourselves of the existence of the real by pointing to what others believe in even if we do not believe in it ourselves.” He concludes, nonetheless, that “they are a fiction with real political and economic consequences.”<sup>121</sup> While *Billboard* may not be the ultimate authority on the nature of music popularity, the increase in hip-hop’s presence on the *Billboard* charts is hard to ignore. Though Public Enemy is celebrated for their explicit politics, their success is not merely a political one, as their music was often conceived with the mass market in mind. Indeed, their combination of politics *and* commercialism worked together to solidify Public Enemy’s place in the hip-hop canon: “For all Public Enemy’s impact – and there were at least four years when the band embodied the best of this culture – its ultimate strength lay in making and selling records.”<sup>122</sup>

In “‘I Don’t Like to Dream about Getting Paid’: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul,” Christopher Holmes-Smith articulates the reordering of hierarchies that occurs when cultural trends “cross over,” or, as the author writes, become “viral”:

Such viral outbreaks of mass trend adoption ... form the unpredictable “tipping points” that are every marketer’s dream. In speculative historical eras, as in individual acts of gambling, there is a moment, of variable duration, when anything goes, as the saying goes ... power is somewhat up for grabs, and a semblance of freedom is more evident because the actual utility and value of precepts and goods are called into question. Thus, a reordering of hierarchies takes place, and depending on where one previously stood in the pecking order, that may not be such a bad situation within which to find oneself.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Brackett, “The Politics and Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965,” 792.

<sup>122</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 154-155.

<sup>123</sup> Holmes-Smith, “‘I Don’t Like to Dream About Getting Paid’: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul” *Social Text* Vol. 21, no. 4, 2003: (69-97,) 74.

Hip-hop's development in Reagan-era America illustrates the narrative that Holmes-Smith offers. Hip-hop in the mid-1980s experienced a "tipping point" that caused an easily identifiable "reordering of hierarchies" for many involved. Murray Forman's *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* paints a portrait of the mid-80s in which these variables – corporate interests, racial ideologies and preconceptions, and audience taste – were in flux:

The crossover success of black artists such as Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, and Kool Moe Dee resides in more than the music alone; crossover always includes a cultural dimension. The carefully orchestrated posturing and posing and the much-circulated images of blue jeans, black leather jackets, and name-brand footwear combine to signify authentic ghetto-identified blackness. These sartorial expressions, along with the rock edge and funk beats, create an overall effect that taps into rock traditions and long-standing notions of teen rebellion to which white consumers have responded since at least the early 1950s throughout the rise of R&B and rock 'n' roll.<sup>124</sup>

Here, Forman elucidates many facets of cross-cultural exchange that comprised hip-hop's crossover in the 80s, from clothing to "posturing" to music. Given the variety of these exchanges during hip-hop's rise in the 80s, it follows that any form of political unification across hip-hop, if it had ever been possible, was certainly not so by this point.

Michael Rogin posits in his book *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* that social groups are ultimately comprised of self-interested individuals, writing that "in the real world only individuals act."<sup>125</sup> In *Hip-hop America*, Nelson George notes that hip-hop, even in its early stages, was never an autonomous, wholly black-owned enterprise,<sup>126</sup> as Latino DJs and dancers were instrumental in disseminating hip-hop to broader audiences. Evidently, there was a lot more going on preceding and during the Golden Era than what Public Enemy represented with their overtly political songs

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<sup>124</sup> Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, 156.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988,) 318.

<sup>126</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 57.



such as “Fight The Power.” Yes, much of the music was political, but I argue that the success of Golden Age hip-hop was both a political *and* a commercial one.

### 1.3 Gangsta rap and Black Identity

While the rapidly increasing financial success of hip-hop music in the late 1980s and into the ‘90s was doubtless considered a victory by many, the age-old conflict between cultural resistance and submission to the evils of the capitalist system grew right along with it. This internal conflict heightened the concern that hip-hop’s power as a political vessel had been supplanted instead by the demands of the larger music industry, thus diluting hip-hop’s ability to “mobilize political awareness,” as Nelson George contends:

even as black music was reaching a commercial peak, it was perceived by many cultural critics as being in a morass, its cultural traditions threatened by industry interventions. Black cultural watchdogs and traditional activists, mindful of the powerful role that music had played in earlier social struggles, warned that major labels’ commercial imperatives could diminish the music’s capacity to mobilize political awareness or to provide cultural adhesion across generations... Despite its multi-platinum sales and the now-standard distribution arrangements linking indies to major labels, rap was still largely free of mainstream industry meddling ... [it] was considered by many of the artists involved in its production to be a pure expression of black cultural identity and youth experience.<sup>127</sup>

This “purity” of black cultural expression would prove to be a major point of contention in the discussion of hip-hop in the 1990s. Clover contends that by the 1990s, “gangsta” rap had become apolitical and unusable as a tool for social revolution, having largely rejected the outspoken politics of groups like Public Enemy and N.W.A.:

Hemmed in on all sides but one, gangsta was in effect disciplined to turn its antisociality along the course of least resistance: to comply with and celebrate an account of Black urban culture which served the ideological ends of that culture’s conservative critics, without being able to confront those very same antagonists.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, 157-158.

<sup>128</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, 46.

The central conflict in question here ultimately surrounds competing expressions of black identity. Forman supports this claim, arguing that the early-90s presented many different sets of criteria of “black identity” and “black cultural authenticity” that were competing for dominance in hip-hop:

With the ongoing industrial appropriation of black music, rap’s status as the next and newest form of black musical invention made it an optimist’s repository for the ideals and values of black cultural authenticity. The ensuing struggles, which reached often deadly proportions by the mid-1990s, clearly involve issues related to the definition of a black identity within competing hip-hop cultural sensibilities as well as debates over what image of black identity should dominate.<sup>129</sup>

If we accept Clover’s narrative of “[black] cultural morass,” then this “path of least resistance” came, at least partially, with an abandonment of Public Enemy’s explicit politics in return for an embrace of a lavish, decadent, even *fun* criminality epitomized by the likes of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. “Nuthin’ but a ‘G’ Thang” (1992), the most successful song from Dr. Dre’s *The Chronic*, a monument of the gangsta era, embodies this shift. As Shea Serrano writes of the song, “It took the nation’s most aggressive, most polarizing movement, a movement born of racism and classism and confrontation and unrest and riots, and made it, quite simply, fun, which made it ubiquitous, which made it unavoidable.”<sup>130</sup> The ubiquity of gangsta rap is illustrated by the numbers: Starting with *The Chronic*, the eight albums that Dr. Dre’s Death Row Records released before 1997 went platinum (these included Snoop Dogg’s *Doggystyle*, Tha Dogg Pound’s *Dogg Food*, and 2Pac’s *All Eyez On Me*). Of those eight albums, six of them hit No. 1 on the US *Billboard* charts.<sup>131</sup> In

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<sup>129</sup> Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*, 159.

<sup>130</sup> Shea Serrano, *The Rap Year Book: The Most Important Rap Song from Every Year since 1979, Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed*. (New York, NY: Abrams Image, 2015,) 92.

<sup>131</sup> Callas, Brad. "What Is the Greatest Hip-Hop Label of All Time?" *Medium*. December 14, 2016. <https://medium.com/@bradcallas/what-is-the-greatest-hip-hop-label-of-all-time-1c02a4d452d5>.

effect, Dr. Dre had managed to sell America on a fantastical caricature of the “gangsta” lifestyle as “fun”:

People pined for the lifestyle. Being a gangster wasn’t dangerous, it was dope and wonderful, because you got to ride around in nice cars under ambient lighting from a perfectly warm sun and play volleyball with large-breasted women and pour beer on people if they weren’t accommodating.<sup>132</sup>

The commercial prowess that labels such as Death Row Records exhibited at this time, however, began to raise concerns in and outside of the hip-hop community surrounding hip-hop authenticity and the genre’s nature as a rebellious form. Kembrew McLeod captures this dichotomy in his article “Authenticity within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation”: “During hip-hop music’s dramatic ascendancy in the 1990s, hip-hop artists and fans found themselves in a contradictory situation that other subcultural groups confronted with widespread acceptance previously faced: being ‘inside’ a main-stream culture they had, in part, defined themselves as being against”<sup>133</sup>. How can a genre rebel against the dominant if it *is* the dominant? As the narrative goes, hip-hop’s consolidation as part of the mainstream in the 1990s also signals an even further estrangement from the more deliberately “political” hip-hop acts like Public Enemy. Instead, there was an emergent concern that the values purported by gangsta rap were harmful and had not only undercut hip-hop’s political potential, but that gangsta rap now gave comfort to antagonists of civil-rights politics:

It is quite conspicuous that hip-hop – that unprecedented global juggernaut – offers up only the most narrow and problematic representations of black imagery. Oversexed black men and women, nihilistic violence, impulsive, vulgar, and criminal behavior have marked all but a handful of platinum hip-hop albums since the early 1990s.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Serrano, *The Rap Year Book: The Most Important Rap Song from Every Year since 1979, Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed*, 92.

<sup>133</sup> Kembrew McLeod, "Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation." *Journal of Communication* vol. 49, no. 4 (1999): (134-50,) 136.

<sup>134</sup> Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, 12.

As I have argued, materialist and economically focused hip-hop of the Golden Age has long been sidelined from hip-hop history. Yet it is undeniable that the early-90s presented an amplification of materialism and conspicuous consumption. This challenged previous conceptions of hip-hop authenticity, and instead saw the values of the streets as the ultimate indices of realness.<sup>135</sup> This is a moment in which a new mode of hip-hop authenticity was fashioned from the repercussions brought forth by the culture wars<sup>136</sup> occurring during this time. Whereas old authenticity relied on political engagement, labels such as Death Row and others offered a different worldview celebrating dominant capitalist values.

As George points out, hip-hop's authenticity debate revolves largely around competing conceptions of black identity, the question of authenticity in the face of mass commercialization can be seen in rock discourse as well. In "Reconsidering Rock," Keightley notes that rock music emerged in part because of its widespread generational support that "led rock musicians and fans to seriously believe that they could 'revolutionise' the world around them."<sup>137</sup> By the mid-1980s, however, rock music was seldom regarded as the voice of a single revolutionary worldview, but – just like hip-hop in the 90s – had splintered, leaving behind a far less cohesive view of the "rock" genre. It is perhaps easier to make sense of older criteria for authenticity when they align with a certain type of socially progressive politics. But newer conceptions of hip-hop "realness" and authenticity are less explicitly invested in these politics. So what could possibly authentic about the genre's conspicuous embrace of capitalism and material wealth? And how could one lay claim to "keeping it real" while submitting wholeheartedly to the demands of the music industry, which

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>136</sup> The culture wars of the early-1990s will be examined in the following section.

<sup>137</sup> Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 140.

has a long and demoralizing history of exploiting African-American artists?<sup>138</sup> These questions inform the following examination of the forces that shaped hip-hop's shift towards gangsta rap in the early-1990s as well as its then-unprecedented commercial success.

#### **1.4 Culture wars, sampling, and the criminalization of hip-hop**

The competing conceptions of black identity in the hip-hop of the mid-1990s can at least partially be attributed to the culture wars waged against hip-hop's mainstream production and distribution. This included a legal assault on the practice of sampling in hip-hop in the early 1990s, and a public condemnation of hip-hop music by major political figures around the same time.

One of the reasons that Golden Age hip-hop is often perceived as the peak of the genre's political interests is because it is also perceived as the Golden Age of sampling. As Clover claims, "Given the critical and legal pressure brought to bear on sampling in particular, it would be impossible to overvalue the fact that hip-hop's Golden Age is the golden age of sampling as well."<sup>139</sup> Hank Shocklee, one of the members of Public Enemy's production team The Bomb Squad, argued in an 2013 interview with *The Atlantic* that the practice of sampling in hip-hop music has long been essential to having lyrics that are "socially conscious":

‘A lot of the records that were being sampled were socially conscious, socially relevant records, and that has a way of shaping the lyrics that you’re going to write in conjunction with them.’ When you take sampling out of the equation, Shocklee said, much of the social consciousness disappears because, as he put it, ‘artists’ lyrical reference point only lies within themselves.’<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Lisa Kay Davis, "Prince Fought Big Labels For Ownership, Artistic Control." *NBC News*. April 21, 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/prince-fought-big-labels-ownership-artistic-control-n560161>.

<sup>139</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*, 36.

<sup>140</sup> Erik Nielson, "Did the Decline of Sampling Cause the Decline of Political Hip-hop?" *The Atlantic*. Sept. 18, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/09/did-the-decline-of-sampling-cause-the-decline-of-political-hip-hop/279791/>.

By the 1990s, however, hip-hop artists started to use instrumentals that relied less on a collage of samples as found on Bomb Squad records and leaned further into heavier use of single samples for a song. But hip-hop's musical shift from N.W.A.'s sample-heavy rage to the laid-back menace of gangsta rap that Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* distilled in 1992 did not spring from the ground spontaneously.

As Clover describes, the culture wars of the late-80s and early-90s led to stern legal restrictions around sampling, a practice which was foundational to the genre.<sup>141</sup> The infamous 1991 case *Grand Upright Music, Ltd. Vs. Warner Bros. Records, Inc.* is widely seen as the moment in which hip-hop's stylistic turn away from sampling was driven by legal necessity. The judge, with what has become an oft-cited quote, opened his ruling with the words "Thou shalt not steal" and proceeded to suggest that Biz Markie and company should be charged criminally for their sampling of a Gilbert O'Sullivan song.<sup>142</sup> From then on, it became extraordinarily expensive to clear samples for songs, thereby destroying the very means by which Public Enemy and N.W.A. had made their explicitly politicized music. So, as Clover writes, "the criminalization of rap returns as the rap of criminalization"<sup>143</sup> in early-90s gangsta rap. This resulted in a departure from the collage-based sampling that the Bomb Squad was known for in favour of a heightened reliance on a single sample for an instrumental. Thus, this stylistic shift in the sound of popular hip-hop, crystallized by Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, was thus partially one of necessity. The "criminalization" of sample-based hip-hop production diminished its use as a tool that could "educate" and "teach" due to new costs of licensing. Instead, the practice of sampling came to mean something

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<sup>141</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*, 36.

<sup>142</sup> Nielson, "Did the Decline of Sampling Cause the Decline of Political Hip-hop?"

<sup>143</sup> Clover, 1989: *Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About*, 48.

very different from “education,” instead developing as a signifier of considerable financial wealth.

As Clover points out (*italics in original*):

‘Economic self-sufficiency’ is no longer thinkable by itself when a song can cost more to make than the median annual salary; this logic permeates all strata of thought. The age of the expensive loop is equally the age of hyper-fetishized commodity. *Bling* is the sound of a Bentley’s headlights glinting off a \$25,000 sample.<sup>144</sup>

As Clover notes, the economic circumstances that surround hip-hop’s production are reflected in the music, including its subject matter and materialistic imagery: “The force of the economic transaction in producing a song thus becomes audible in the song’s aesthetic form and finally available as part of its content, in gangsta’s fascination with material goods.”<sup>145, 146</sup> But despite the materials or “economic transaction” that influence hip-hop production, the fixation on material goods (in the consumerist sense) in the actual lyrics remains a central facet of the case in critics’ attacks on new-school hip-hop’s material forces.

Renowned hip-hop producer Pete Rock goes so far as to say that because of sampling restrictions and the attendant loss of political and historical consciousness, *nothing* can be learned from new hip-hop artists:

These new artists, you cannot learn anything from them...Not one thing. Nothing...It’s just whack how the game changed into ignorance...Subtract sampling and you get ignorance...[hip-hop practitioners] are not open to learning about what was before them.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>146</sup> This will be discussed further in section 2.5’s examination of Migos’ song “Versace”.

<sup>147</sup> Rock, Pete. In “Did the Decline of Sampling Cause the Decline of Political Hip Hop?” by Erik Nielson. *The Atlantic*. September 18, 2013.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/09/did-the-decline-of-sampling-cause-the-decline-of-political-hip-hop/279791/>.

Pete Rock's emphasis on not being able to "learn" anything from "new artists" is yet another facet of the common expectation for hip-hop to fulfill progressive interests by being able to *teach* listeners something. Historical knowledge becomes another important element of this old-versus-new debate, as knowledge of hip-hop's forebears is, for Rock, seen as a prime indicator of authenticity. This issue will come up again when discussing hip-hop's current "new school" artists, some of whom have professed an unabashed ignorance of hip-hop's foundational figures. What is particularly striking from Rock's quote, however, is how directly he connects the lack of sampling with ignorance. If this is true, then the economically-driven "criminalization" of sampling can be seen to have been a direct assault on the "learning" that hip-hop had fostered, in turn catalyzing the the rise of what are deemed the less constructive characteristics of hip-hop in the 1990s.

In addition to the criminalization of sampling, hip-hop in the early-90s also experienced public assaults from high-profile political figures. William J. Bennett, who was director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy during George H.W. Bush's administration, and C. Delores Tucker, who was president of the National Congress of Black Women, collaborated to publicly denounce mass media conglomerate Time Warner's involvement with hip-hop's "violent and misogynistic" lyrics.<sup>148</sup> Ogbar notes that in the same month, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich argued for advertisers to boycott radio stations that play 'vicious' hip-hop music.<sup>149</sup> "They could drive violent rap music off radio within weeks,"<sup>150</sup> he states. Ogbar further notes that these events are indicative of the broader culture wars of the early 1990s,<sup>151</sup> though still, he argues, hip-hop was most affected by them: "More than any genre of music, hip-

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<sup>148</sup> Ogbar, *Hip-hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, 111.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.



hop has felt the brunt of attack from a wide array of detractors who, for various reasons, have expressed outrage and disdain at what they consider inappropriate cultural expression.”<sup>152</sup>

Much can, and has, been said about what constitutes “appropriate” hip-hop expression. But considering the war waged on the practice of sampling in tandem with the subsequent outrage at gangsta hip-hop, a glaring contradiction becomes clear: First, hip-hop is most often deemed by scholars, critics, politicians and others an appropriate form of cultural expression when it fulfills a certain set of socially conscious politics, as epitomized by Public Enemy. Second, it is apparent that sampling is seen as foundational to the creation of this type of educational and socially conscious hip-hop. But if appropriate hip-hop expression is limited to its politics, and if sampling is essential to this type of expression, the criminalization of sampling by the State, followed by the subsequent dismissal of non-“conscious” hip-hop by members of the same government embodies what Dimitri A. Bogazianos would call in his book *5 Grams* a “core of social betrayal.”<sup>153</sup> The claims made by Bennett, Tucker and Gingrich fail to consider that the downturn in explicitly political hip-hop music is a direct result of the criminalization of its production by the U.S. criminal justice System, which, of course, is a part of the very same government under which they were employed.

Despite the array of assaults on hip-hop in the 1990s, its commercial potential could not be ignored. In addition to the millions of albums sold by the likes of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg during this time, hip-hop was quickly becoming recognized as an effective way to sell other, unrelated products as well.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>153</sup> Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, 54.

## 1.5 “They don’t regret getting a Coca-Cola deal. They brag about a Coca-Cola deal”: Hip-hop’s early celebratory capitalism

In addition to hip-hop’s increasing commercial payout in the early 90s, hip-hop also began to occupy economic space in areas less directly related to the music itself. In 1994, a young junior brand manager at Sprite named Darryl Cobbin initiated what turned out to be the highly successful “Obey Your Thirst” marketing campaign, one which used hip-hop as the primary focus of its advertisements. Cobbin recruited hip-hop artists such as Pete Rock & CL Smooth, Large Professor, and Grand Puba, and Common Sense for a series of ads – ads which presented not Sprite, but hip-hop as the primary focus. Sprite was secondary. But the “Obey Your Thirst” campaign made Sprite the fastest-growing soft-drink brand in America for two years straight,<sup>154</sup> tripling in units sold and becoming responsible for nearly half of Coca-Cola’s overall growth during that time.<sup>155</sup> Wu-Tang Clan’s line of apparel, “Wu-Wear,” which began as a small-scale boutique, became successful to the point where, in 1997, it became the first “urban” brand to get a window display in Macy’s lead store in Herald Square.<sup>156</sup> Events such as these –Sprite, Wu Wear, and more – demonstrated that hip-hop’s commercial potential was not necessarily limited to album sales and radio play. But more significant is how openly many hip-hop artists embrace this blatant commercialization. While it is certainly plausible that political acts such as Public Enemy may have scoffed at the thought of a corporate sponsorship, the ‘90s saw many hip-hop artists not only embracing this commercial turn, but bragging about it:

Hip-hop is perhaps the only art form that celebrates capitalism openly. To be sure, filmmakers pore over weekend grosses, but it would be surprising for a character in a Spielberg film to suddenly turn toward the camera and shout, "This picture's grossed \$100 million, y'all! Shout out to DreamWorks!" Rap's unabashed

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<sup>154</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-hop*, 495.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 495.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 490.

materialism distinguishes it sharply from some of the dominant musical genres of the past century. For example, nobody expects bluesmen to be moneymakers--that's why they're singing the blues. It's not called the greens, after all. As for alternative rockers, they have the same relationship toward success that one imagines Ally McBeal has toward food: even a small slice of the pie leaves waves of guilt. Rappers make money without remorse. 'These guys are so real, they brag about money,' says Def Jam's Simmons. 'They don't regret getting a Coca-Cola deal. They brag about a Coca-Cola deal.'<sup>157</sup>

As Simon Frith<sup>158</sup> and David Buxton<sup>159</sup> convincingly argue, popular music is inevitably a part of the capitalist system. Even so, it is clear that hip-hop's relationship with capitalism is distinctive: there exists perhaps no other genre in which "getting paid" is such a central focus for those involved.

In this chapter I contended that "getting paid" has been a foundational aspect of African-American popular music well before hip-hop showed up. While much of popular music criticism perpetuates the idea that the "civil-rights generation" of 1970s African-American music was unified in its obligation to socially progressive politics that sought to uplift the Black community, Weisbard suggests that the need for "commercially viable" music was at least an equal priority. Politically outspoken and commercially viable music are by no means mutually exclusive in hip-hop; Weisbard demonstrated that these two perspectives ultimately worked *together* to further the advancement of hip-hop music in the 80's and onwards.

The culture wars of the 1990s, which sought to criminalize the very means of hip-hop production (sampling), would force hip-hop artists to adapt and find new modes of expression unhampered by legal restrictions. For Pete Rock, among others, sampling is a cornerstone of hip-

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<sup>157</sup> Christopher Farley, "Hip-hop Nation," *TIME*. 1999.

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,19134,00.html>.

<sup>158</sup> Simon Frith, "The Industrialization of Popular Music." In *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007, 93-118).

<sup>159</sup> David Buxton, "Rock Music, Star System and the Rise of Consumerism" *Telos*. 1983. 93-106.

hop's ability to teach and educate. The criminalization of sampling by the U.S. criminal justice system in the early-90s led to, for Rock, the development of hip-hop music in which "nothing" can be learned. The rise of gangsta rap in the 90s was seen by many – including major U.S. political figures – to be an inappropriate form of cultural expression, resulting in attempts by Newt Gingrich, among others, to further suppress hip-hop by banning it from the radio. The irony here, of course, is that the rise of "inappropriate" gangsta rap in the 90s, which spurred such negative perception among U.S. politicians, is arguably the result of the criminalization of sample-based hip-hop by U.S. legal system.

Despite the various attacks on hip-hop during the early-90s, hip-hop music was becoming more popular than ever. Here we begin to see a marked increase in corporate co-option in which hip-hop music began to be used not just to sell music, but to sell other products, from clothes to soft drinks, again reinforcing Hebdige's claim that "new commodities" are a result of subcultural incorporation. These early business dealings with major brand names foreshadow the development of hip-hop music as an unabashed commercial juggernaut in the early-2000s, which will be analyzed in the following chapter. Chapter 2 will also examine the ascension of the hip-hop mogul in the mid-1990s and into the 2000s, followed by a preliminary inquiry into the rise of Southern hip-hop – the source of the trap style – during this time.

## **Chapter 2: "Two warring ideals in one dark body": moguls, duality, and the rise of Southern hip-hop**

This chapter explores the rise of the hip-hop mogul in the 1990s and into the early-2000s. Hip-hop moguls are prominent record label executives who may also be performers. They are also one of the most multifaceted and complex characters in hip-hop, as they embody an intersection

of class, race, and gender. Depending on who you ask, major moguls such as Jay Z and Diddy are either complicit with the music industry's exploitation of hip-hop culture or important leaders of Black economic advancement. This chapter uses the figures of Jay Z and Diddy to help frame a discussion of subsequently successful Southern hip-hop moguls – namely, Birdman and Master P – who helped establish the South as a commercial force at this in the late-1990s and well into the 2000s. The South is important because so many of new-school hip-hop's current stylistic characteristics are indebted to pioneering Southern artists such as Lil Jon.

First, a brief discussion of the general significance of the hip-hop mogul will be useful for my analysis. Moguls have emerged as an influential force within the music industry: Christopher Holmes-Smith illustrates the common characteristics of hip-hop moguls in his article “I Don't Like to Dream about Getting Paid: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul,” writing,

On the one hand, the hip-hop mogul bears the stamp of American tradition, since the figure is typically male, entrepreneurial, and prestigious both in cultural influence and personal wealth. The hip-hop mogul is an icon, therefore, of mainstream power and consequently occupies a position of inclusion within many of the nation's elite social networks and cosmopolitan cultural formations. On the other hand, the hip-hop mogul symbolizes something new about traditional American corporate culture since he is also typically young (under the age of 50), typically African American, and typically tethered either literally or symbolically to America's disenfranchised inner cities.<sup>160</sup>

We will further analyze Holmes-Smith's elucidation of hip-hop in the following section. As younger men of colour occupying positions of corporate power historically reserved for wealthy whites, hip-hop moguls thereby occupy a unique position in the music industry.

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<sup>160</sup> Holmes-Smith, “I Don't Like to Dream About Getting Paid’: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul,” 69.

## 2.1 Moguls and double-consciousness

Michael P. Jeffries, Dan Charnas and several other observers point to the late-90s and early-2000s as a time in which hip-hop began to further permeate more mainstream aspects of popular culture: "...previously fearsome rappers like Ice Cube and Ice-T became movie stars, and hip-hop soundtracks made their way into fast food commercials and television cartoons."<sup>161</sup> Charnas points to occurrences of mainstream incorporation of hip-hop such as these to support his claim that the early-2000s indicate the moment when hip-hop truly "cashed out."<sup>162</sup> Central to hip-hop's incorporation during this time is Jay Z (born Shawn Corey Carter). His rise from street hustler to rap star in the late-90s and then to businessman and mogul in the early-2000s merges with hip-hop's heightened mainstream presence in these years.

Jay Z's early career as a drug dealer on the streets of Brooklyn granted him a type of street authenticity that informed his classic 1996 debut *Reasonable Doubt*, an album which detailed a mafia-like<sup>163</sup> lifestyle involving ostentatious consumption of expensive material goods like clothes, cars, and fine wine<sup>164</sup>. *Reasonable Doubt* proved to be an influential album for subsequent rappers, who, in Jay Z's footsteps, described lifestyles that were similarly committed to "rabid materialism":

Largely considered a classic, *Reasonable Doubt* inspired scores of imitators who similarly rapped about high-end cars, fashion, 'moving product,' and killing enemies in order to maintain power. From Ja-Rule to 50 Cent and Rock Ross, such lyrics glorifying crime and rabid materialism have given rap critics a growing following.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Michael P. Jeffries, "Where ya at? Hip-hop's political locations in the Obama era." *Cambridge Companion to Hip-hop*, ed. Justin A. Williams. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 314.

<sup>162</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop*, 535.

<sup>163</sup> Ogbar, *Hip-hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*, 112.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

While materialistic subject matter proved to be a successful commercial formula – 50 Cent’s debut album *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* is the tenth-highest-selling hip-hop album of all-time in the U.S., for example<sup>166</sup> – not everyone was on board with “rabid materialism.” Indeed, some of the most vocal critics of this music were artists within the hip-hop community itself. Ogbar notes that the rise of conspicuous consumption and materialism in popular ‘90s hip-hop was railed against by, among many others, The Roots, Public Enemy, Jurassic 5, A Tribe Called Quest, Mos Def, and Blackalicious. De La Soul made this explicit in their 1996 song “Stakes is High,” rapping “sick of Versace glasses ... / sick of brand-name clothes ... / sick of swoll-head rappers with their sickening raps.”<sup>167</sup> Jay Z’s early musical output certainly provoked such points of concern. But his transformation over the course of his career from a drug dealer to a rapper to a mogul, and eventually to a semi-political figure signifies a multitude of personae.

The mogul is among the more complex players in the rap industry. Some view the mogul as economic leaders of the Black community and a realization of Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth,” in which he argues for racial uplift via economic empowerment. Others, however, view them as gaudy individuals who have sacrificed the ideals of hip-hop’s political rebellion by submitting wholeheartedly to the lures of American capitalism, which, as Malcolm X said, “you can’t have ... without racism.”<sup>168</sup>

Moguls such as Jay Z and Sean “Diddy” Combs are among the key players in this discussion, as they ask their audience, as Holmes-Smith puts it, to “buy in” to the utopian ideal

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<sup>166</sup> Eric Ross, “The 50 Best Selling Rap Albums of All Time.” *Complex*. May 18, 2013. <https://www.complex.com/music/2013/05/the-50-best-selling-rap-albums/>.

<sup>167</sup> De La Soul, “Stakes Is High.” Tommy Boy/Warner Bros., 1996.

<sup>168</sup> Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Pathfinder, 1989,) 69.

that one can really “have it all.” The mogul highlights questions of hip-hop authenticity as they work within a hegemonic, capitalist system while simultaneously furthering the careers of some of hip-hop culture’s most celebrated political rappers in contemporary hip-hop like Kendrick Lamar. Moguls like Jay Z and Dr. Dre may be chastised for their celebration of, and participation in, the capitalist system, but at the same time, they were key figures in hip-hop’s domination of popular music. Jay Z played a central role establishing Def Jam Records as one of hip-hop’s premier record labels, while Dr. Dre and Death Row Records were integral to launching the careers of Eminem and 50 Cent, and of Kendrick Lamar, who is widely regarded as a hip-hop “saviour.” Evidently, untangling this dichotomy is a difficult task:

The hip-hop mogul thus simultaneously symbolizes inclusion within and resistance toward mainstream capitalism and emerges as a potent blend of the ‘speculative con,’ the ‘disciplined self-made man,’ and an entrancing figurehead of racial double-consciousness with a capitalist twist.<sup>169</sup>

The hip-hop mogul embodies many of these contradictions. Sociologist Leo Lowenthal’s idea of the “idols of consumption” is helpful when examining the position of the hip-hop mogul as hip-hop’s emergent ruling class. Lowenthal contends in his 1944 text that, leading up to WWI, society’s most celebrated “mass idols” were idols of “production”; that is, they achieved tangible contributions to society in the form of business, or politics, or being “serious” artists.<sup>170</sup> Contrastingly, Lowenthal argues that at the time of his writing (WWII), the focus had shifted from idols of “production” to idols of “consumption”:

We called the heroes of the past “idols of production”: we feel entitled to call the present day magazine heroes “idols of consumption.” Indeed, almost every one of them is directly, or indirectly, related to the sphere of leisure time: either he does not belong to vocations which serve society’s basic needs (e.g., the heroes of the world

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<sup>169</sup> Holmes-Smith, “‘I Don’t Like to Dream About Getting Paid’: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul,” 84-85.

<sup>170</sup> Leo Lowenthal, *Literature and Mass Culture: Volume 1, Communication in Society*. First ed. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017,) 213.



of entertainment and sport), or he amounts, more or less, to a caricature of a socially productive agent ... the entertainment and sports world[,] the ... newspaper and radio men, the professional model, the inventor of sports devices, the quack doctor, the horse race gambler, the inventors of gadgets, the owner of the island resort, and the restaurant chain owner ... [are] nonpolitical heroes directly active in the consumers' world.<sup>171</sup>

Though Lowenthal wrote this in 1944, his framework helps position the hip-hop mogul within modern culture. Indeed, hip-hop moguls can be seen to occupy both of the spaces of production and consumption. As we will see, their role in the production of hip-hop music grew increasingly powerful as the '90s progressed. At the same time, moguls constantly show off their participation in consumer culture through the ownership of luxury items. And though, as we will see, some critics would support Lowenthal's claim that moguls are "non-political heroes," I argue that moguls in fact occupy a unique political location within Western society.

The dual occupation of productive and consumptive realms puts moguls in a unique position – one that is the subject of a variety of both positive and negative criticism. On one hand, the stories of rappers-turned-moguls Jay Z and Diddy can be seen to represent the achievement of financial progress that W.E.B. Du Bois depicted in "The Talented Tenth." On the other hand, scholars such as Nelson George argue that the hip-hop mogul only perpetuates the pitfalls of the capitalist system that continues to exploit African-American artists.

Sean "Diddy" Combs is the author of the seven-times-platinum debut album *No Way Out*, founder of Bad Boy Records,<sup>172</sup> winner of three Grammys, and has a net worth of \$825 million.<sup>173</sup> Combs has faced similar criticism to Jay Z; Nelson George describes Sean "Diddy" Combs not as a hip-hop leader, but as a celebrity complicit in the commercial degradation of hip-hop: "From his

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 216-17.

<sup>172</sup> Label artists include Notorious B.I.G. and Craig Mack.

<sup>173</sup> Wealthy Gorilla Staff, "P Diddy Net Worth." *Wealthy Gorilla*. February 19, 2019. <https://wealthygorilla.com/p-diddy-net-worth/>.

days proudly displaying his ‘iced-out Rollie’ in big budget videos to his multi-tasking in the watering holes of the rich and famous, his P. Diddy persona had been key in leading hip hop from ghetto grime to designer floss. Hip hop had always been aspiration, a ticket out of the ‘hood, but that ticket now seemed to be for a trip straight to the most banal forms of celebrity.”<sup>174</sup> Combs, despite his celebrity, proves to be a somewhat mysterious and complicated figure to analyze.

Du Bois’s idea of double-consciousness is illuminating when it comes to not only moguls, but hip-hop at large. Du Bois elucidates his idea of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -an American, a Negro; his two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>175</sup>

The “two-ness” that Du Bois describes as both an American and a Negro is visible in hip-hop. On one hand, hip-hop artists and moguls actively participate in the system of American capitalism, where fulfillment of the “American Dream” can be seen as the highest social aspiration. On the other hand, African-American members of the hip-hop community are “seen through the eyes of others,” often judged in “contempt and pity” for their perceived submission to “designer floss” and “banal celebrity.” After all, moguls are among the most visibly high-spending individuals in Western society – Jay Z left the serving staff a \$50,000 tip on a \$250,000 bill at his and Kanye West’s *Watch The Throne* album release party in 2011, for example.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 222.

<sup>175</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2007,) 2-3.

<sup>176</sup> Serrano, *The Rap Year Book: The Most Important Rap Song from Every Year since 1979, Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed*, 208.

Serrano notes that though this conspicuous display of material wealth can be dismissed as simple one-sided narcissism<sup>177</sup>, it is more complicated than that. Serrano invokes Du Bois's idea of duality in his reading of Jay Z and Kanye West's hit 2012 song "Niggas in Paris" from *Watch The Throne*. He argues that because of Jay and Kanye's unique social position status as two of the most powerful players in hip-hop, they are able to deliver critical commentary on the capitalist system from a perspective held by very few: "If you escaped what I escaped / you'd be in Paris gettin' fucked up too," Jay Z rapped on the track, juxtaposing his early days as a young drug dealer on the streets of Brooklyn with the lavish hedonism of his present lifestyle. This juxtaposition, in which Jay Z's changed class position inflects his racialized position, suggests a double-consciousness in and of itself. Serrano further elucidates the song's political implications: "[ 'Niggas in Paris' ] ... possessed the same sort of social critique that more lauded rap songs before it contained, and ... if anything, it had its finger on the pulse of these same anti-capitalist ideologies. It was just being delivered from a place no rappers had ventured into before."<sup>178</sup> For Serrano, part of what makes the song significant is that these sentiments were delivered from the luxurious vantage point of two of the most economically successful rappers in the history of hip-hop.

Mickey Hess further illustrates the dualities that arise with moguldom in "Metal Faces, Rap Masks":

While ... industry developments have worked lyrically to extend claims of credibility to the act of self-marketing, or operating a successful, artist-owned record label, several rap songs also relate a mistrust of the record industry through stories of shady dealings with record executives, A&R staff, and concert promoters. This historical and ongoing tension creates an anxiety, or doubleness, for the rap

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 208.

performer, who must at the same time market himself and maintain ownership and control of his identity.<sup>179</sup>

Evidently, hip-hop moguls operate within a complex space that presents its share of contradictions. Jay Z's long-term success as a rapper suggests a successful navigation of "shady dealings," while his development as a hip-hop mogul and economic leader has granted him the ability to simultaneously maintain ownership of his identity. Indeed, Jay Z's is the ultimate story of success in this realm; besides authoring six or so "classic" albums, he currently holds the title as the richest person in hip-hop and is worth an estimated \$900 million.<sup>180</sup> In addition, his marriage to Beyoncé and their friendship with the Obama family indicate a prominent participation in the spaces of U.S. society's elite.

While George may view moguls such as Diddy as complicit celebrities, they can also be read in a more positive light. Indeed, moguls such as Diddy and Jay Z have shown an aptitude at navigating the double-consciousness required by moguldom, granting them a position as economic leadership in the Black community. This can be seen as a modern embodiment of W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal 1905 text "The Talented Tenth," which calls for African-American leadership in education, business, and culture as a means of buttressing the racially imbalanced structures that (still) frame Western society. Diddy himself has commented on this notion in a recent *GQ* profile, written by John Jeremiah Sullivan:

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<sup>179</sup> Mickey Hess, "Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hops Persona Artist." *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 3 (2005), 303.

<sup>180</sup> Mark Abadi, "Jay-Z is worth \$900 million – see how the rapper-turned-mogul makes and spends his fortune" *Business Insider*. September 9, 2018. <https://www.businessinsider.com/jay-z-net-worth-2018-9>.

In his conversations with Jay-Z, they've been using the term “black excellence” for leaders who came forward to uplift the race by example. It was an updated incarnation of W. E. B. Du Bois's “talented tenth.”<sup>181</sup>

Diddy and Jay Z, then, can be seen as updated manifestations of Du Bois’s concept. Both men were pivotal to hip-hop’s commercial growth before, during, and after 1999. Jay Z and Diddy’s various business pursuits can be understood as the “talented tenth” notion for which Du Bois advocated. Jay Z’s Tidal streaming service, for example, claims space in the music streaming industry by making his and Beyoncé’s music available only on that service, thereby using their star power to grant them considerable economic power within the music industry given the popularity of their music. “Financial freedom our only hope,” Jay rapped in 2016 on his track “The Story of O.J.,” further illustrating his prioritization of economic advancement as both African and American. Indeed, figures such as Jay Z and Diddy can be seen to manifest Du Bois’s ideals in the context of hip-hop business.

Jay Z and Diddy’s deftness at navigating the duality of moguldom has granted them the means to manifest Du Bois’s idea of the “Talented Tenth.” But while Jay Z and Diddy can be seen to manifest Du Bois’s ideals, thus positioning them as politically engaged and “socially conscious” figures, the same cannot be said for all moguls – especially some Southern ones.

## **2.2 Southern moguls**

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<sup>181</sup> John Jeremiah Sullivan, “Diddy Opens Up About Biggi’s Death and the Secret Project he’s Working On with Jay-Z.” *GQ*. March 19, 2018. <https://www.gq.com/story/diddy-gq-cover-story-2018>.

While Jay Z and Diddy were quickly becoming two of the biggest rappers in the world in the late-90s, the South was also experiencing a rise in mainstream popularity outside the South. This was in large part thanks to two labels: Cash Money Records, led by mogul brothers Bryan “Birdman” and Ronald “Slim” Williams, and No Limit Records, led by rapper-turned-mogul Master P. Though both of these labels experienced heightened success at a similar time, the values espoused by the leaders of each differed considerably – not only from each other, but from the political ideals of Du Bois for which Jay Z and Diddy have voiced their support. Nonetheless, the rise of the mogul in the South is tied to the marked increase in the popularity of Southern hip-hop in the United States.

Cash Money Records, arguably still Southern hip-hop’s marquee label, was founded by New Orleans brothers Bryan “Birdman” Williams and Ronald “Slim” Williams in the early 1990s.<sup>182</sup> Their label played an important role in establishing the Southern hip-hop as a mainstream commercial force in the late-1990s by using a business model that differed from hip-hop labels prior: “Rather than trusting outsiders, they kept things in the family. If they couldn’t hire their own siblings or offspring, they worked with others and made them blood [brothers].”<sup>183</sup> Cash Money gained early local success with several “bounce”<sup>184</sup> music releases in part thanks to the brilliance of their in-house producer Mannie Fresh.<sup>185</sup> Cash Money’s early success afforded them the power to sign the then-up-and-coming rapper Juvenile, whom the label desired for his harder sound and

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<sup>182</sup> Ben Westhoff, *Dirty South: Outkast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011,) 117-118.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>184</sup> Westhoff writes of the bounce genre on page 118 of *Dirty South*, “before there was New Orleans hip-hop, there was bounce music.” This quote positions bounce music as a stylistic stepping stone to Southern hip-hop as we have come to know it.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 118.

professionalism.<sup>186</sup> Westhoff notes that Fresh and Juvenile proved to be a “transcendent pairing,”<sup>187</sup> first heard on Juvenile’s 1997 debut album *Solja Rags*. The album’s local success, coupled with the rapper-producer chemistry displayed on the album, can be seen as an important factor in Universal Music Group’s decision in 1998 to offer a partnership with Cash Money. Cash Money would receive 80 percent of sales profits, \$3 million annually, and \$30 million over three years for videos, marketing, touring, and recording.<sup>188</sup> The first release after this partnership was Juvenile’s 1998 magnum opus *400 Degreez*, which would become his and Cash Money Records’ first platinum album and first national success. *400 Degreez* remains one of Cash Money Records’ best-selling albums to date – a significant title, considering chart-toppers Lil Wayne, Nicki Minaj, and Drake are all label affiliates. Because of its mainstream success, *400 Degreez* helped establish Southern hip-hop as a powerful commercial force,<sup>189</sup> making it a key historical aspect of the rise of trap music and the new-school. Co-founder Slim has noted the importance of maintaining his “family first” ethos in the face of mainstream incorporation: “To corporate [executives], you’re just an artist in a box. But when you fuck with us, you inherit a family.”<sup>190</sup> It is evident that Cash Money’s continued survival is in large part due to Birdman’s resolve, as he has navigated the Du Bois’s double-consciousness between corporate interest and artist empowerment that comes with moguldom. He says:

I’m still fighting for some of the same shit that [Universal] shouldn’t be fucking with me about. I understand what an artist goes through because I play both sides of the fence, the artist and the CEO shit. So I understand why a lot of these artists are

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>189</sup> It should be noted that Drake and Nicki Minaj are not “Southern” artists, though they have strong ties to Cash Money and other Southern artists (especially Future).

<sup>190</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 137.

crippled.<sup>191</sup>

The “crippling” that Birdman suggests points to the long and arduous history of exploitation of African-American artists by major record companies. The irony, of course, is that Cash Money, an African-American label, has one of the longest and most publicized histories of internal conflict of any label in hip-hop history. This has resulted in the “crippling” of the very artists that have sustained the label’s success. Their narrative is riddled with in-fighting between label members and executives, most famously between Lil Wayne and Birdman, a feud which delayed the release of Lil Wayne’s highly anticipated *Carter V* album by about four years.<sup>192</sup> This resulted in Lil Wayne’s \$51 million<sup>193</sup> lawsuit against the label that has also embroiled labelmates Nicki Minaj and Drake in a long and bitter saga of legal warfare. Label member Tyga also sued Cash Money for \$10 million in August of 2018 for withheld album royalties.<sup>194</sup> Though Cash Money Records may have been able to withstand pressure from external corporations like Universal, the perpetual inner conflict in the label suggests a level of self-interest and exploration that seems more toxic or dysfunctional than other hip-hop labels, not to mention far from the “family” focus that Slim claims to support.

Master P’s No Limit Records, founded in 1990 in San Francisco before relocating to the South (New Orleans) in 1995, has an equally plagued history. No Limit was responsible for an “unprecedented”<sup>195</sup> run of success in the late-90s – P’s label is estimated to have earned \$160

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>192</sup> Chris Mench and Brian Josephs, “The Timeline of Lil Wayne’s Issues with Cash Money Records and Birdman.” *Complex*. October 12, 2018.

<sup>193</sup> Ryan Bassil, “The Rise and Fall of Cash Money, the Label Lil Wayne is Suing for 51 Million Dollars.” *Noisey*. January 31, 2015.

<sup>194</sup> Nick Mojica, “Tyga Sues Cash Money and Young Money for Album Royalties.” *XXL*. August 29, 2018.

<sup>195</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 130.



million<sup>196</sup> on sales of some 23 albums released in those years, while Guinness World Records named P the highest earner at that time with a net worth of \$361 million.<sup>197</sup> This accomplishment landed him on the cover of *Fortune*, which, as Westhoff writes, is “the most supreme accomplishment a rapper can hope for.”<sup>198</sup> But while the highs of No Limit Records were high, the label experienced a dramatic decline in commercial dominance by the turn of the millennium. No Limit’s downfall, Westhoff argues, was the result of ill-fated attempts at corporate partnerships and expansion. Master P’s alternate business ventures in things such as fashion, phone sex, and sports management were often ill-advised and quick to fail.<sup>199</sup> No Limit filed for bankruptcy in 2003, and later became the relatively inconsequential No Limit Forever Records in 2010.

All of this suggests that the mogul operates in a precarious space within the music industry. The dysfunction of Birdman’s Cash Money Records, despite its alleged mantra to put “family” over corporate interests, reflects a level of self-interest that can be read as the antithetical to what are considered to be the collective social interests of “Golden Era” hip-hop. The in-fighting of Cash Money can be seen, then, to support George’s claim that moguls are not always inclined towards any type of progressive social politics. Meanwhile, Master P’s series of ambitious but ill-advised business ventures ran his label into the ground, which can be read as a failure to manifest Du Bois’s ideal of an economically stable “talented tenth”. Southern moguls embody some of the tensions that were simultaneously arising with the increasing popularity of Southern hip-hop music, which has long been characterized as similarly apolitical. This is exemplified by the rise of

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>197</sup> Kristyn Gansen, “5 Rappers who have been included in the Guinness Book of World Records.” *AXS*. April 20, 2015. rappers-who-have-been-included-in-the-guinness-book-of-world-records-49584.

<sup>198</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 131.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 132.

“crunk” music in the early-2000s, a Southern hip-hop subculture popularized in large part to Atlanta rapper Lil Jon. Crunk, as we will see, is also important in this discussion because it is a foundational stylistic precursor to today’s new-school.

### 2.3 Lil Jon and the rise of Crunk

Lil Jon’s establishment of the “crunk” scene is an important factor in the South’s rise to dominance. Crunk is a genre that can be said to be all about the party. As Ben Westhoff writes, “It’s raucous party music with coarse drum machine rhythms and repetitive, electro-style synth lines, not particularly concerned with lyrics or flows. It features strong bass, but it’s slower paced than Miami bass, less for shaking than for knocking into things.”<sup>200</sup> Crunk music’s rise is important in this narrative because it signifies another reordering of hip-hop’s stylistic priorities. Crunk was mainstream hip-hop once again moving further away from the values that are considered to have comprised the Golden Age and away, as well, from the “gangsta nihilism” of the 1990s.

It has been noted that Lil Jon was instrumental in facilitating the crossover of crunk music: “I don’t know who invented crunk ... but Jon branded it.”<sup>201</sup> Ben Westhoff details the chant-driven lyrics that Lil Jon helped popularize: “None of them could rap, but it didn’t matter. Jon had decided that rhyming couplets, verses, and other fancy-shmancy rap elements were filler, and that what listeners really desired were short catchphrases shouted ad nauseum.”<sup>202</sup> Lil Jon’s formula proved successful, helping crunk reach what Westhoff calls the genre’s “tipping point” with his 2003 song

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<sup>200</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 178.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>202</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 179.

“Get Low,” best known for the famous lyric ““To the window / To the wall! / Till the sweat drip down my balls,” a rhyme that exemplifies crunk’s chant-based characteristic. The song peaked at #2 on the *Billboard* Hot 100<sup>203</sup> and was ranked #70 on *Billboard*’s End-of-Decade hot 100 chart.<sup>204</sup> Clearly, crunk had crossed over.

With Lil Jon’s heightened success came criticism. On one hand, some echoed the sentiment that Lil Jon, with his “shiny grills, sunglasses, and jewel-emblazoned pimp chalices”<sup>205</sup> was some type of “minstrel-poseur,” as Greg Tate wrote in *Village Voice*.<sup>206</sup> This value judgement recalls the dismissal of West Coast gangsta rap in the early-90s, and later Jay Z, as similarly materialistic and once again inauthentic. On the other hand, however, some argued that the raw energy and anti-“pseudo-intellectualism”<sup>207</sup> of crunk music paralleled that of the punk music of the 1970s: “What punk was to rock, crunk is to rap,” André 3000 once said,<sup>208</sup> a claim that grants Lil Jon an alternate mode of authenticity by invoking punk tradition.<sup>209</sup> André 3000’s comparison is significant, especially considering the deep influence of Lil Jon on not only Southern hip-hop artists, but West Coast ones as well:

The more you think about it, the more it seems that post-millennium southern rap in its entirety owes its lineage to Lil Jon. You can draw a line from his approach to instrumentation -- lush with 808s and zippy synthesizers -- to the work Shawty Redd did on ‘Thug Motivation 101,’ Young Jeezy’s defining album. That sound eventually blossomed into the busy production style of Lex Luger, and has now

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<sup>203</sup> “Lil Jon.” *Billboard*. <http://www.billboard.com/music/lil-jon>.  
[www.billboard.com/music/lil-jon](http://www.billboard.com/music/lil-jon).

<sup>204</sup> David Seabrook, “Billboard Magazine’s Top 100 Songs Of The Decade.” *The Annoyatorium*. December 11, 2009. <http://www.annoyatorium.com/tm.aspx?m=348854>.

<sup>205</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 180.

<sup>206</sup> Westhoff, *Dirty South: OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-hop*, 181.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>209</sup> Discussion of the relation between 70s punk and post-millennium Southern hip-hop will be discussed further in chapter 3.

come full circle with the minimalism of West Coast producers like DJ Mustard and IAmSu. Jon doesn't miss a beat.<sup>210</sup>

In addition to Lil Jon's popularization of Southern production techniques, the repetitive, chant-based, party-oriented lyrics of Lil Jon's most popular songs can also be seen as a direct stylistic influence on some of hip-hop's most supposedly decadent (and commercially successful) current artists. As Burton notes, crunk receded in popularity by the mid-2000s. As crunk fell, "trap" music was just getting started:

Crunk's recession from the mainstream in the mid-00s dovetails with trap's rise, and it's easy to hear the connections ... while [trap music] is music played at clubs, its content leads inevitably back to the drug game and the trap house, with the club-based call-and-response of crunk diffusing into a less orchestrated group of background voices scattered about the trap.<sup>211</sup>

Since trap music's emergence in the mid-2000s, its influence has spread rapidly to the point where its characteristics now inform not only the most popular hip-hop, but pop and rock music as well. Many of today's most commercially successful hip-hop artists, including Future, Cardi B, Lil Uzi Vert, Rae Sremmurd and Migos can all be comfortably situated within the "trap" genre, though as will become apparent, their music reaches far beyond the confines of the trap house.

Crunk music proved to be a powerful influence on the direction of mainstream hip-hop. Lil Jon's presented a shift in focus from the gangsta materialism of the 90s to chant-driven jams that emphasized the party. Though crunk music receded in popularity by the mid-2000s, we will see in the following discussion that the subsequent ascent of "trap music" owes many of its foundational characteristics to crunk.

Trap music is essential to this discussion because it has become the dominant sound

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<sup>210</sup> Weinstein, "The Return of Lil Jon and Why It's No Surprise."

<sup>211</sup> Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 108.

of the new-school hip-hop of the last six years. But we must first examine the context of its origins in Atlanta, Georgia in the mid-2000s in order to better understand its current position in 2019.

## 2.4 “Who Doesn’t Wanna Sell Dope Forever?”: Trap music

Trap music is defined in part by its connection to the “trap house”: “‘trap’ in trap rap refers to a house used for cooking dope. It has a single entry/exit point so that, once inside, a person is trapped there unless those securing the door allow them to leave. It is, quite literally, a trap.”<sup>212</sup> Atlanta trap pioneer T.I.’s 2003 album *Trap Muzik* is seen by many<sup>213</sup> (T.I. included<sup>214</sup>) as the foundational text of trap music. He has said that the album is for “whether you in the trap selling dope, in the trap buying dope, or in the trap trying to get out ... It’s informative for people who don’t know nothing about that side of life.”<sup>215</sup> Trap music originated as the soundtrack for the production of crack cocaine in the vastest, and fastest, quantities possible. The music is workmanlike; its driving percussion and chant-based lyrics<sup>216</sup> reflect the labour of its environment.

Dimitri A. Bogazianos notes that it is no coincidence that “work” is also slang for cocaine:

crack work, across the board, is described as hard, street-level grinding, characterized by cramped kitchens and pots and pans, whose mundane routineness is often punctuated by bursts of lethal violence ... Grinding, in short, reflects a specific crack-era hustle that is inseparable from the period’s most devastating effects.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 82.

<sup>213</sup> Stephen Kearse, “T.I.: *Trap Muzik*.” *Pitchfork*. September 9, 2018. <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/ti-trap-muzik/>.

<sup>214</sup> Trace William Cowen, “T.I. Reminds Everyone he Invented Trap Music: ‘Only Fools Dispute Facts!’” *Complex*. April 10, 2018. <https://www.complex.com/music/2018/04/ti-reminds-everyone-he-invented-trap-music>.

<sup>215</sup> Patel, “From T.I. to TNGHT: A Look at Trap Rave.”

<sup>216</sup> Crunk was previously described by Westhoff as “chant-based.”

<sup>217</sup> Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, 55.

Here, we can make a direct link to the “grind” of the crack game that informed Jay Z’s 1996 debut album *Reasonable Doubt*. However, while trap undeniably shares similarities with Jay Z’s crack-era hustle, trap’s “grind” is still different from Jay Z’s. Burton offers an inspired reading of the 2014 song “Move That Dope” by Future featuring Pharrell Williams, Pusha T, and Casino and produced by Mike Will Made It. He elucidates trap music’s connection with labour, noting that Pusha-T’s declaration “Who doesn’t wanna sell dope forever?” on the track signifies a commitment to the trap lifestyle as well as a rejection of the “upward” narrative that artists such as Jay Z capitalized on in the 2000s as drug-dealer-turned-mogul. Burton argues that trap’s social structure is reflected in the musical structure as well:

Jay-Z ... has built an entire persona and musical empire around the upward mobility afforded by his grind: you grind to ascend in the drug game, to ascend in the music world, to be your own boss ... Pusha T’s indifference to upward mobility is mirrored in Mike Will Made-It’s instrumental ... [Move That] ‘Dope’ features a steady sixteenth note [hi-hat] pattern. Its bassline entails a kick drum layered with a bass synthesizer with no decay; each attack is sustained until the next attack, filling the lower register with a relentless signal that, when combined with the evenly distributed hi-hats, feels like it could go on forever, just like Pusha-T’s dope dealing days.<sup>218</sup>

Burton notes that this commitment to the trap reflects a different type of ‘grind’ than that of artists like Jay Z. While Jay’s narrative is about upward mobility and thus an escape from the street drug trade, the trap narrative is more circular and repetitive: “Trap, then, evokes a grind similar to that of previous eras of rap, but instead of grinding one’s way to the top, increasing one’s social and political capital as the money piles up, trap stays in the trap.”<sup>219</sup> Pusha T, who is now 41 years old, continues to profess a strong commitment to the dope game in his music.

Burton argues that Bogazianos’s notion of the “grind” that is associated with trap music is reflected in trap music’s propensity for party songs as well. Though prominent hip-hop songs

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<sup>218</sup> Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 95.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

celebrate partying and spending money, Burton contends that that for some hip-hop artists, the party is simply another facet of trap music's connection with specific types of work. For some rappers, it is their *job* to start the party: "Lil Jon's job *is* partying, so a realm of leisure becomes his labor ... the proliferation of his persona in live settings helps sell his recordings and concert tickets and other professional endeavours."<sup>220</sup> Lil Jon's participation in the labor required by production of hip-hop music then becomes a means by which he can participate in the realm of conspicuous consumption in the form of "jewel-emblazoned pimp chalices" and the consumptive aspects of partying and leisure. Lil Jon once again manifests a mixture of Lowenthal's mass idols of both production and consumption.

While artists such as Lil Jon embody the roles of production and consumption, Burton argues that through these roles, new-school artists occupy a political location as well. As Burton writes, "Partying, enjoying yourself, when the world intends you to suffer can be a powerful political activity."<sup>221</sup> In his insightful reading of "Tuesday," the 2014 hit by Atlanta's iLoveMakonnen featuring Drake, Burton encapsulates the song's withered attitude towards partying as a result of working: "'Tuesday' is a weary account of partying when one is too overworked and tired to party. Makonnen and guest artist Drake sing of running drugs and performing shows ... then partying on a Tuesday. Why do Makonnen and featured guest Drake have the club going up on a Tuesday? Because they 'ain't got no motherfuckin' time to party on the weekend,' that's why." Burton's reading of 'Tuesday' illustrates the labour that still underpins even the most ubiquitous trap party anthems. The song's production, courtesy of Sonny Digital and Metro Boomin, is similarly lethargic. Burton argues this stylistic choice reflects the "grind"

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 109.

of the trap in the context of the leisure-space of the club:

Instead of hyped background vocals, ‘Tuesday’'s vocal soundscape is empty but for the echoes of Makonnen's leads. The hi-hats are there, but they pound out straight sixteenth notes with nary a rattle to be heard ... the “Tuesday” deep bass synth nosedives. If Mike Will Made-It's production on ‘Move That Dope’ presents an entirely mundane and static soundtrack for the drug game, ‘Tuesday’ mirrors that in the club when all the wage-earning work is done. Like the rappers who don't have the energy to dance, the instrumental just manages to hold itself together and never bothers to do more than it has to.<sup>222</sup>

From this reading, it is fair to suggest that trap music is the music of necessity; it is the music of the “grind,” whether that grind be the trap house or the club. Either way, trap music is about labour; whether that labour be cooking dope, partying, or making music, it is all subsumed under the economic market logic of the trap.

Indeed, many of trap's musical characteristics suggest the bustling, unforgiving micro-economy of the trap house, whether it be in the form of busy rhythmic patterns, or jarring but impeccably mixed percussive interjections, or the deep, driving bass that oversees – or rather, underpins – the entire operation. Burton suggests that this music operates under a different logic from that of, say, Kendrick Lamar, who he argues actively vies for social reorganization through political engagement:

The sonic aesthetics of trap are its politics, too. Instead of a fixed, static blackness that is everything ‘hostile [ears]’ believe it to be, trap offers a plethora of voices sounding from all directions, unable to be hemmed in or pinned down, always finding a way to vibrate and reverberate out of the trap by means other than the single, designated entry/exit point (Neff 2009, 160.). Trap uses the performance and sonification of the grind not to argue ... for admittance into the mainstream by way of some entrepreneurial belonging. Rather, trap recycles the losing end of Kendrick's black parallel public in the interest of occupying a sonic and political space that is received as apolitical or even scary, outside the channels of political discourse.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 100.



Burton goes on to suggest that the type of market logic presented by Southern trap artists offers a different route from that of the Jay Zs and Kendricks: “it defies neoliberal market logic by investing in the impurities of criminality, diluted products, and sonic blackness.”<sup>224, 225</sup> As Potter, writing 20 years earlier, contended about hip-hop music in general, it “is not merely a critique of capitalism, it is a counter-formation that takes up capitalism’s gaps and contradictions and creates a whole new mode, a whole new economics.”<sup>226</sup> Indeed – especially in the last few years – the trap has become increasingly visible and audible as a location which operates under its own alternative market logic that is at times averse to the “upward mobility” of Jay Z and Kendrick.

This brings us to Migos. Potter’s “new economics” can be discerned in Migos’ song “Versace.” “Versace” finds Migos operating within the ethos of trap production, which sits outside the more conventional market logics of Jay and Kendrick. But on the consumption side, it also finds them positioned within the mainstream capitalist system through their conspicuous consumption of luxury items, an attitude that aligns closely with the narrative of Jay’s “upward mobility.” The following analysis of “Versace” will further delve into these gray areas. “Versace” is specifically important because it can be seen as a signpost pointing to trap music’s increasing influence on mainstream hip-hop in the last six years or so. “Versace” turned out to be a crucial moment not just for Migos’ career, but also for the stylistic direction of mainstream hip-hop music. After “Versace,” a new crop of young, triplet-rapping, money-flaunting rappers entered the mainstream, helping the new-school of hip-hop become recognized as a genre with big crossover commercial potential. Philadelphia’s Lil Uzi Vert as well as Atlanta’s Young Thug and Lil Yachty,

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>225</sup> Burton’s claims will be illuminated in the following section, which closely examines Atlanta trap group Migos’ song “Versace.”

<sup>226</sup> Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, 111.

all of whom have become stars in their own right, probably owe at least some of their success to that of Migos. Although Migos may not be directly responsible for each of the many facets of trap music's ascent, after "Versace," change was afoot for modern mainstream hip-hop.

## **2.5 "Pleasure cooked down to a crystal": Migos' "Versace"**

In October of 2013, the Atlanta hip-hop trio Migos, consisting of Quavo, Offset, and Takeoff, established themselves as an undeniable force in the trap world when they released their single "Versace" from their then-upcoming album *Y.R.N. (Young Rich Niggas)*. Though Migos had been making music for some time and were well-known in the Atlanta area prior to "Versace," the song elevated not only their careers, but arguably the trap genre, into the mainstream conscience. The song appeared on numerous year-end "best of 2013" lists, including *Pitchfork*, *XXL*, and *Rolling Stone*. Though trap music in 2013 was in the early stages of its journey to ubiquity, "Versace" signaled a sea change not only for Migos, but for the sound of modern hip-hop. On June 22, 2013 when Toronto superstar Drake released a remix of the song, it peaked at #99 on the US *Billboard* digital song sales.<sup>227</sup>

Over the course of three verses and a chorus between each, Migos take turns rapping about how rich, influential, and powerful they are by using the Versace brand as an indicator of their success. For three minutes, Versace is an object of consumption that informs their production; it is a symbol of their achievement of the American Dream. Their shared energy is infectious as they punctuate their verses with shouted background ad-libs. Their lines come in tumbling, dense triplet clusters that ebb and flow as the verses progress.

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<sup>227</sup> "Migos: Chart History." *Billboard*. <https://www.billboard.com/music/Migos/chart-history/r-b-hip-hop-songs>.

The song is built around a triplet-metered vocal delivery in which the three Migos take turns chanting “Versace!” between percussive and rhythmically dense verses that detail lives of opulence, clout, and swagger. The song is brash, celebratory, and above all, fun. Throughout the track, Migos take turns bouncing sharp and witty lines off one another, like Quavo’s “My plug,”<sup>228</sup> he John Gotti / He give me the ducks and I know that they’re mighty,” or Takeoff’s “My blunts”<sup>229</sup> is as fat as Rasputia,”<sup>230</sup> or Offset’s “Them blue and white diamonds, they look like the Pistons”<sup>231</sup>.

Musically, “Versace” is centred around a single five-note theme that starts on the dominant (E), crawls chromatically upwards to E# and then back down to the dominant. It is voiced by a glassy synthetic bell sound reminiscent of the sound a cash register makes when the drawer opens. This riff repeats for the song’s duration, while every four repetitions, a growly, lower-octave synth brass joins in, voicing the same riff but beginning on the tonic (A), crawling upwards to A# and then back down to A. What results when the brass line joins in is a menacing harmonic progression – a perfect fifth moving in unison up and back down a half-step, like a slowed-down metal riff. This pattern – the constant main riff on the 5<sup>th</sup> while the brass harmony alternates between silence and presence every four bars – suspends resolution to the tonic (A) so that, as Burton says of “Move That Dope,” it feels as though it could be looped forever. (Beethoven, with whom Zaytoven shares his namesake, is also known for creating tension by suspending resolution to the tonic via

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<sup>228</sup> “Plug” is slang for drug dealer. *Genius* annotators BasedGator and doublehelixcables write, “Ducks of course are birds, and birds is another name for a brick of cocaine. Since Quavo is comparing his plug to the infamous crime boss John Gotti, he knows the product he got is of good quality. Quavo’s mighty ducks also refers to the 90’s Disney movie by the same name.”

<sup>229</sup> A “blunt” “is defined as a slang word for a marijuana cigarette wrapped in a hollowed out cigar.

An example of blunt is the method many marijuana smokers use to smoke marijuana in the hip hop community.” *YourDictionary*. [www.yourdictionary.com/blunt](http://www.yourdictionary.com/blunt).

<sup>230</sup> Rasputia is a very obese female character played by Eddie Murphy in the 2007 film *Norbit*.

<sup>231</sup> The NBA team Detroit Pistons’ colours are blue, white, and red.

lengthy insistence on the dominant. The final section of the first movement of Beethoven's 2<sup>nd</sup> piano sonata immediately comes to mind.) In "Versace" these two lines – the higher cash-register one and the lower brassy one – work in juxtaposition with each other: the higher one cuts through the percussive chaos (which we will get to) and the bubbling arpeggiators (which we will also get to) like a church bell in a bustling city. Meanwhile, the synth's timbre is reminiscent of frost on glass, adorned with slight reverb that allows it to resonate. It's worth noting that these two terms – "frost" and "glass" – are frequently deployed by new-school hip-hop artists as slang for diamond jewelry. In other words, the synth is meant to *sound* expensive. Meanwhile, the lower brass synths on "Versace" offer a stark contrast. If the upper synth can be read as the sound of cashing out, the lower one encroaches on this narrative by offering what sounds like a more dangerous alternative reality. Entering every four measures and then remaining there for four repetitions, the lower synth continually threatens the sonic and tonal prominence of the main upper riff by playing the same notes but a fifth, and several octaves, down the scale. These two synth narratives tangle with each other throughout the song's entirety – one victorious, triumphant, and one ominous, looming. As Du Bois writes in another context, it suggests "two warring ideals in one dark body."<sup>232</sup>

Zaytoven employs an arpeggiator<sup>233</sup> for the majority of the song to lend further turbulence to the instrumental, its rubbery timbre zigging and zagging throughout. The track is in some ways reminiscent of a substance bubbling and boiling in a pot, as perhaps one might find in a trap house. This, along with the ever-shifting main synth melodies, combines for a rich and textured sonic palette that complements the song's lyrical mantra. The frenetic energy of the instrumental is taken

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<sup>232</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2-3.

<sup>233</sup> YourDictionary defines an arpeggiator as "A feature of some synthesizers that automatically steps through a sequence of notes based on an input chord, thus creating an arpeggio."  
<http://www.yourdictionary.com/arpeggiator>.

to even greater heights, however, by the song's percussion, which (in classic Zaytoven manner) is intricate and expressive. Over an insistent and deep 808<sup>234</sup> and a clap sound on every second and fourth beat of each measure, several percussion lines play off each other. One hi-hat maintains a steady eighth-note pulse, while another skitters and skirts around in small, dense clumps. Snare rolls and fills abound, lending a sense of regality to the instrumental backing. The percussion is dense with polyrhythms and subtle variations in rhythm. Over the course of the song, Zaytoven "cuts" the beat by rapidly turning the volume of the backing track all the way down – usually at the end of an eight-bar phrase – only to impose it full-force again on the subsequent downbeat. Overall, the song's instrumental is dynamic and lively, succeeding in conveying an affect of epic grandiosity in a relatively short time span. And, as its influence on subsequent hip-hop and pop music will indicate, the "Versace" flow was far more than a gimmicky novelty act.

While on one hand, Jay Z represents a type of upward aspiration, and on the other hand, Pusha T's declaration "Who doesn't wanna sell dope forever?" represents a commitment to the circularity of the trap, Migos offer a dual narrative. Their outward association with luxury goods like Versace reflects a type of conspicuous consumption that has been practiced by the likes of Jay Z. At the same time, however, a more inward-looking attitude towards production is suggested by their professed commitment to the trap, similar to Pusha T. Takeoff may say "You copped the Honda, I copped the Mazi" on "Versace," but in the same verse, he's "cooking the dope like I work at Hibachi." Though it is hard to imagine Migos *still* cooking dope given their superstar status, the inhabitation of both the trap workplace and the luxury lifestyle is indicative of the duality that

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<sup>234</sup> Dictionary.com defines an 808 as "the common nickname for the Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer, an electronic drum machine from the 1980s popular in hip-hop music." <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/808/>.

characterizes much new-school hip-hop.

As Burton suggested, Jay Z's narrative is that of "upward mobility" and the resulting achievement of financial freedom, as is symbolized by his status as one of the music industry's primary moguls. Despite trap music's alternate market logic, perhaps Migos represent an extension – or perhaps an exaggeration – of that narrative: like Jay, Migos made it out of the drug game and into superstardom. Like Jay, the hustle is integral to their music. Jay once described his first #1 single, "Big Pimpin,'" as "pleasure cooked down to a crystal."<sup>235</sup> "Pleasure cooked down to a crystal" is, in fact, an apt description for the style of Migos and those they have influenced. Like the crack that Migos and Jay Z sold prior to their stardom, the Migos flow is tightly packed in small, easily consumable parcels to maximize commercial viability. They and their peers release music at a high rate, producing "a never-ending supply feeding a ravenous demand."<sup>236</sup>

Migos songs like "Versace," and later "Bad and Boujee," "T-Shirt," and "Narcos" find Quavo, Offset, and Takeoff rapping circles around each other, detailing lives of opulence and material consumption while simultaneously professing their commitment to the dope game of the trap. Migos' fixation on financial gain and gross materialism can be read as a hyper-intensification of the narratives of many rappers before them, cooked down to its purest form in songs like "Versace." "Versace my clothes while I'm sellin' them bows / Versace took over, it took out my soul," Offset raps in the final couplet the song's final verse. This line gains a heightened significance in the context of our discussion of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, where Du Bois describes "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on." "Bows" is slang for a pound of drugs, suggesting that Offset is submitting fully to the capitalist system of the trap by copping

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<sup>235</sup> Serrano, *The Rap Year Book: The Most Important Rap Song from Every Year since 1979, Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed*, 137.

<sup>236</sup> Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 95.

Versace clothes and hustling drugs at the same time, so much so that perhaps it has even taken over his soul. Offset has also been noted for his “obsession with music industry data-watching”<sup>237</sup> such as chart positions and sales numbers; when asked about it on the *First We Feast* YouTube video series “Hot Ones,” Offset said, “The numbers match up to what you are. So your worth go by your numbers. The lower your numbers, the lower your worth – that’s just how it is.”<sup>238</sup> Offset’s statement here can also be seen to parallel Du Bois’s “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on”; Offset similarly measures his worth as both an African and an American man through the ‘tape’ of his place within the capitalist system. The combination of Migos’ music as “pleasure cooked down to a crystal,” as “feeding a ravenous demand,” and as Offset’s claim that one’s “worth” lies in one’s “numbers,” position Migos firmly within the ethos both of the trap and of the mainstream market – again, two warring ideals.<sup>239</sup>

## 2.6 “Versace” and new-school gender politics

Some of the most widespread criticism of new-school hip-hop is centred around the often-problematic gender dynamics that the music at times portrays. It is no secret that mainstream hip-hop has had a long and complicated relationship with homosexuality, female hip-hop figures and feminism in general. In *Prophets of the Hood, Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry argues that black male identity, as seen in hip-hop has been shaped in response to dominant and oppressive white patriarchy: “The black male patriarch, where he exists, lives a fragile existence, mediated

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<sup>237</sup> Joe Coscarelli, “Emerging From Migos as His Own Man: The Metamorphosis of Offset.” *The New York Times*. November 29, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/arts/music/offset-migos-cardi-b-interview.html>.

<sup>238</sup> First We Feast, “Offset Screams Like Ric Flair While Eating Spicy Wings | Hot Ones.” YouTube video, 22:40. February 28, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9o\\_ifDQWLE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9o_ifDQWLE).

<sup>239</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2-3.

by his own encounters with white male patriarchy.”<sup>240</sup> This echoes Du Bois’s idea of double-consciousness, where he argues that African-American men are “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others ... measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on.”<sup>241</sup> Invoking bell hooks’s “Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic,” Perry adds that the development of African-American hypermasculinity is therefore a response to the “objectification of the white male gaze”: “black men are subject to patriarchal objectification through white male gaze, and thereby become feminized ... black men have fought back by embracing hypermasculinity.”<sup>242</sup>

Perry also contends that though hip-hop culture is “gendered male,” male identity in hip-hop is constructed in a relationship of opposition to women.<sup>243</sup> This construction has more often than not constituted a relatively narrow view of masculinity within hip-hop. Gwendolyn D. Pough notes that construction often comes at a cost to anyone who does not adopt it, noting “hostility” in hip-hop towards non-alpha-males in her book *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*:

This hostility is evident not only in the lyrics but also in the attitudes that some rappers exhibit toward women and homosexuals, marginalizing and oppressing anyone who is not Black, straight, male, and dripping with testosterone. Even though Hip-Hop culture suffers state oppression, it can and does in certain instances act as an oppressor.

The hostility that Pough describes can be seen to inform Michael Eric Dyson’s concept of “femiphobia,” an attitude which he argues is reflected in the disdainful attitude towards the female and the feminine in hip-hop. Dyson writes that “femiphobia” “has become a crucial aspect of the

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<sup>240</sup> Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006,) 111.

<sup>241</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2-3.

<sup>242</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, 113.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



culture of signification in rap that influences the lyrics of hip-hop artists, measures authentic rap- and hence, male-identity, specifies a pervasive machismo, and forges masculine bonds within the culture.”<sup>244</sup>

Indeed, Migos and many other hip-hop artists often perpetuate this unequal gender dynamic in their music and their music videos. The lyrics of “Versace” are actually relatively innocuous for a Migos song – the most abrasive might be, say, “She asked me why my drawers silk / I told that bitch Versace.” However, members of Migos have often explored considerably more problematic territory (Offset’s lines, “Hit the bitch,<sup>245</sup> quit the bitch / Sucking on dick like licorice / Hit her one time and get rid of it ... / Blocked her, she on dismissed list” from the song “Coupe” with Lil Baby is one of the more obvious and offensive iterations). More explicitly than its lyrics, the “Versace” music video helps better illustrate some of the gender dynamics that Migos perpetuate. We will see that Migos embody hooks’s and Perry’s framework of existence as African-American men oppressed by the gaze of white patriarchy. Migos construct their masculine identity in the “Versace” video in opposition to the female, subordinating her to an object of consumption and thus participating in Dyson’s theory of “femiphobia.”

The “Versace” music video takes place both within and in the yard of a large, luxurious mansion, around which a lone cheetah prowls throughout the video. The inside of the mansion is adorned with massive paintings, gold chandeliers, and many young, conventionally attractive women. Migos and a few other men are shown jumping around, dancing, and rapping on different areas of the property, swathed from head-to-toe in luxury threads (presumably Versace) and

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<sup>244</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003,) 182.

<sup>245</sup> “Hit” is common hip-hop slang for “to have sex with.”  
<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hit>

dazzling jewelry. While the women in the video are dressed similarly, one of the more remarkable aspects of the video is the difference in demeanour between the men and the women. While Migos are boisterous, active and rambunctious in the video, rapping and bragging with zeal and much physical activity, the women assume a much more passive, static role in which they move much less and never are shown speaking (one of the women is shown in the courtyard moving a giant Bishop chess piece, which is as close to narrative agency as any of the women get). In this video, women are subjugated to the realm of ostentatious decoration, like the paintings on the walls or the chandelier on the ceiling. Women can be read in this video as merely another object of Migos' conspicuous consumption. Migos rarely interact with the women – there is one shot of Quavo walking alongside a woman in the mansion's courtyard, though they never make eye contact.

It is clear that even in the face of white oppression, Migos still actively oppress as a means of asserting or gaining power. Perry illustrates the demoralizing nature of this reality:

It is a terrible quandary to feel that in order to liberate one gender in the community, the other has to suffer further oppression, a quandary presented both for those primarily concerned with black women and those primarily concerned with black men.<sup>246</sup>

Indeed, it is a problem that in order for many male hip-hop artists to feel empowered, they must achieve it by stepping on (often black) women, who often already exist at the intersection of sexist, racist, and economic oppression.<sup>247</sup>

The “Versace” music video can also be read as a performance of what Perry calls the “African-American badman tradition.” She describes the badman as “an outlaw, challenging a societal order antithetical to the expression of African American humanity.

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<sup>246</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, 119

<sup>247</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241.

He is a rebel to society, living on the margins of a black community that at once regards him as a hero and a threat.”<sup>248</sup> In “Versace,” and sometimes in reality, Migos can be seen to participate in this badman tradition. Migos’ origins in the trap houses of Atlanta certainly situate them in a rebellious position in society on the margins of the black community. At the same time, their display of conspicuous consumption in “Versace” and elsewhere demonstrates a certain type of heroics, which, as I argued, is reflected in the song’s affect. Perry notes that one of the key characteristics of the badman is his oppression of the female as a means of self-empowerment: “The badman treats the female body as an object of his sexual prowess, as a geography on which to graft the territory of his badness.” Perry likens this characteristic to the hip-hop trope of the “pimp” by invoking Nelson George, who writes: “In a warped and unhealthy way the pimp’s ability to control his environment (i.e., his stable of women) has always been viewed as an example of black male authority over his domain ... by his exploitation of women, the pimp endures as an antihero among young black males.”<sup>249</sup>

Migos’ embodiment of the badman in the “Versace” video is reinforced by the fact that most of the women portrayed in this environment are white. This is important to note, considering Perry argues that the badman “plays on all of White America’s fears about the ‘big black dick’ and, most frighteningly (for the mainstream), is imagined as individually triumphant in the battle with White America rather than as falling victim to lynching or castration.” Like the badman, Migos can be seen to play on this fear in the “Versace” video, in which they assert power through “authority over [their] domain ... by [their] exploitation

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<sup>248</sup> Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, 120.

<sup>249</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 36.

of women”<sup>250</sup> while simultaneously playing on White American fears about black men and white women. This can be read as a distinctly resistant and rebellious move that attempts to antagonize mainstream, White American fears surrounding race and gender, even as it furthers gendered forms of oppression.

Migos can be seen to at times reinforce the structures of gendered oppression that continue to frame hip-hop culture. This is evident in the “Versace” music video, in which Migos can be seen to adopt the hypermasculine “badman” sensibility that generates power through the objectification, subordination and even “consumption” of women. While Perry notes that behaviour such as this is a “terrible quandary,” she also contends that we must also understand the hypermasculine black male as an oppositional figure to the white patriarch, which is the ultimate oppressor of hip-hop culture. “Versace” and its music video demonstrate Migos’ embodiment of several tensions among class, race, gender, and status. As we will see, “Versace” foreshadows many of the tensions within new-school hip-hop here in 2019. Our consideration of “Versace” also provides context for the beginning of chapter 3, in which I will further examine the politics of African-American bling culture and conspicuous consumption.

## **2.7 Chapter 2 summary**

Hip-hop’s mainstream incorporation in the early 1990s yielded immense payouts for a few, including an emergent class of hip-hop moguls. But others lost out considerably, manifesting the worry held by many that hip-hop would not be able to maintain its resistant identity in the face of its deepening ties to mainstream markets. Moguls exist within both the spaces of production and consumption as framed by Lowenthal’s theory of “mass idols.” Because many moguls, such as Jay

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 36.

Z and Diddy, are African-American and originate from impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods, Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness provides further insight into the male moguls' locations as both African and American, as both businessmen and black men who must "always [be] looking at one's self through the eyes of others ... measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -an American, a Negro."<sup>251</sup> Jay and Diddy's remarkable success as moguls, however, has afforded them a significant amount of economic power. At their best, Jay and Diddy can be read as active practitioners of Du Bois's "Talented Tenth," as economic leaders of the Black community. Others, such as Nelson George, are quick to dismiss the cultural value of the hip-hop mogul, however, arguing that while moguls may have once been considered a legitimate inspiration, they now presented "a ticket to the most banal forms of celebrity." Regardless of one's position, it is undeniable that moguls have played a central role in the success of some of the most commercially successful rappers in history, including 50 Cent, Eminem, and Juvenile.

The worldview of Southern hip-hop moguls shares some similarities and some differences with those of Jay Z and Diddy. The dysfunctional histories of both Cash Money and No Limit Records suggest an intense level of self-interest that has led, in Cash Money's case, to the "crippling" of many of the label's artists, while No Limit went bankrupt. Still – in part thanks to Lil Jon's popularization of "crunk" music – the rocky history of two of Southern hip-hop's premier record labels did not seem to affect the burgeoning popularity of Southern hip-hop music through the early-2000s and all the way up to 2019.

While "crunk" receded by the mid-2000s, trap music was just beginning to rise. Lil Jon's stylistic influence is audible in much of this music, as it expresses similarly materialistic and

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<sup>251</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2-3.

hedonistic sentiments to Jon's music. Burton argues that this points to a type of market logic that contrasts with that of Jay Z and Kendrick Lamar: instead of progress, it vies for a more circular and repetitive form of capital accruelement – "trap stays in the trap." After examining their song "Versace," it is clear that Migos both reject and accept certain characteristics of Jay Z's upward aspirations and Pusha T's commitment to the trap.

Burton's *Posthuman Rap* provides a great deal of insight into the economic and political locations of Southern hip-hop. Burton's work provides a context for locating Migos as participants in both the production and consumption tendencies of Lowenthal's "mass idols." Analysis of Migos' influential 2013 song "Versace" illustrates the group's position in both the trap and in the mainstream capitalist system that they openly celebrate through their conspicuous consumption of luxury items. Zaytoven's trap production choices, as we discussed, can be heard to accentuate this dual position.

The music video for "Versace" also highlights an oppressive and multifaceted gender dynamic. In it, Migos embody a hypermasculine badman attitude that empowers them in part through the subordination of women. This is evident in the "Versace" video's depiction of women as passive and decorative, mere items for Migos' continued hypermasculine hyperconsumption.

Ultimately, there are several dualities at play here: between moguls as both idols of production and consumption, as both champions of resistant hip-hop culture and champions of mainstream capitalism, and ultimately, as both African and American. Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness will inform the first section of my last chapter, in which we will examine the role of hip-hop bling culture in the United States.

### **Chapter 3: Takeover**

By now it is clear that conspicuous consumption and bling have long been prominent aspects of hip-hop culture. This chapter will first examine criticism surrounding conspicuous consumption and material wealth in the hip-hop context, as there exists a widespread concern that the celebration of conspicuous consumption in hip-hop reinforces rather than resists the hegemonic structures of capitalism. Next, I will use the work of Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen to provide a theoretical framework for understanding consumption and status. With this framework in mind, I will then examine some contemporary literature by critics such as Roopali Mukherjee and Michael P. Jeffries, who analyze conspicuous consumption in hip-hop culture. Using these aforementioned works, I will argue that the conspicuous consumption displayed by some members of the African-American hip-hop community is one response to an intersection of race and class-based forms of marginalization. New-school hip-hop artists especially have shown a heightened emphasis on conspicuous consumption. Ownership of conspicuous items, therefore, may be a means by which new-school hip-hop artists seek to reorder cultural and social hierarchies by staking a claim in the ownership of luxury items that are usually associated with Western society's (white) elite.

### **3.1 “All Falls Down”: Criticism of Conspicuous Consumption and Bling**

There is an emerging body of literature surrounding African-American bling culture and conspicuous consumption in the United States. Not all of these readings are especially generous, especially in the context of hip-hop. Some scholars argue that the celebration of conspicuous consumption embraces a hegemonic capitalist system that has helped to keep a wide swath of the African-American population in an underclass for decades. For example, in 2014 Jeffrey Podoshen, Susan A. Andrzejewski, and James M. Hunt conducted a study the results of which

showed that the inclination towards conspicuous consumption is significantly higher among both hip-hop listeners as well as African-Americans.<sup>252</sup> This behaviour ultimately misreads conspicuous consumption as a solution to real economic problems, reinforcing the social order in which cultural goods are hierarchized and thereby conforming to hegemonic structures<sup>253</sup> that can be seen to serve the interests of the dominant class. The authors elucidate the negative ramifications of purchasing “conspicuous items”:

the [African-American] community, like others, faces potential overspending on conspicuous items and consumer debt ... The concern, of course, is that this continued focus on status and attainment of possessions can also come with negative outcomes related to social anxiety (Schroeder and Dugal 1995), compulsive buying (Roberts, Manolis, and Tanner 2003), and family-related stress (Roberts, Manolis, and Tanner 2006).<sup>254</sup>

The concerns that Podoshen et. al express regarding conspicuous consumption are elaborated on in Kanye West’s 2004 track “All Falls Down,” the title of which can be read as both a metaphor for the collapse, or “falling down,” of one’s financial situation, family situation, self-worth, status or perhaps all of those. In it, West famously raps, “You always see me with at least one of my watches / Rollies and Pashas done drove me crazy / I can’t even pronounce nothin’ – ‘Pass that Ver-say-see!’”<sup>255</sup> West’s line about not being able to pronounce the word “Versace” despite owning the designer’s products is also indicative of a larger truth: that mere ownership of “high” cultural goods such as Versace does not necessarily equate directly with the upward mobility that is promoted by the likes of Jay and Diddy. Next, West raps, “Then I spent four

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<sup>252</sup> Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Susan A. Andrzejewski, and James M. Hunt, “Materialism, Conspicuous Consumption and American Hip-Hop Subculture.” *The Sustainable Global Marketplace*, (2014, 25.) 278-279

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>255</sup> Kanye West, “All Falls Down.” *Def Jam/Roc-A-Fella*, 2004.



hundred bucks on this / Just to be like, ‘nigga, you ain’t up on this!’” *Genius.com*<sup>256</sup> annotator Maboo observes that this couplet finds West drawing upon “a hierarchy based on capitalistic values ... instead of helping the community, Kanye contributes to the legacy of colonial violence on African Americans. He is aware he is doing this but he can’t stop himself.”<sup>257</sup> Smith aligns this type of behaviour with a value system perpetuated particularly by hip-hop moguls that regards luxury items as the ultimate vehicle for social status: “the mogul inspires his more downtrodden constituents to ‘buy in’ to the emerging paradigm of accessible luxury and social status.”<sup>258</sup>

Even hip-hop artists themselves worry that the value that members of the hip-hop community place on ownership of luxury items can usurp the ownership of more practical items: West goes on to rap, “I ain’t even gon’ act holier than thou / ‘Cause fuck it, I went to Jacob with 25 thou / Before I had a house, and I’d do it again,” illustrating Podoshen and company’s claim that compulsive buying of expensive consumer goods (‘Jacob’ refers to celebrated jeweler Jacob the Jeweler) can often take precedence over family matters and the ownership of property, the traditional mark of higher class status (a house, in the case of the song). The conspicuous consumption displayed by new-school rappers can be seen to represent, in West’s case at least, a conscious decision to buy into a hierarchy based on consumer-capitalistic values that largely abandons the claims for Black empowerment that is most associated with hip-hop’s Golden Era. “It seems we livin’ the American Dream / But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem,” he raps, indicating the sentiment that the material luxury afforded by the achievement of the

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<sup>256</sup> *Genius* began as a public annotation website for hip-hop lyrics, but now annotates many things, such as music, movies, TV shows, interviews, etc.

<sup>257</sup> Maboo, “All Falls Down Lyrics.” *Genius*. <https://genius.com/Kanye-west-all-falls-down-lyrics>.

<sup>258</sup> Holmes-Smith, “‘I Don’t Like to Dream About Getting Paid’: Representations of Social Mobility and the Emergence of the Hip-Hop Mogul,” 71.

American Dream does not necessarily translate to other, less quantifiable measurements of success like social capital, family stability, and personal fulfillment.

West's remarks regarding the apparently unfulfilling nature of economic and material success can be seen as contradictory to Du Bois's "Talented Tenth." Whereas Du Bois advocated for empowerment through economic growth, West illustrates a *disempowering* experience of economic success. While Du Bois advocates for economic empowerment through leadership in the Black community, West's perspective suggests that too often economic leadership in the Black community is sidelined by the material aspirations for which new-school rappers also advocate. What's more is that in the fifteen years that have passed since Kanye's "All Falls Down," many new-school rappers have to an extent discarded the self-interrogation that West offers on his track when it comes to materialism, in favour of a more one-sided attitude that openly celebrates the trappings of material excess. Newly successful rapper Rich The Kid's December 2018 single "Splashin'" finds him rapping, "Coulda bought a crib, bought a droptop"<sup>259</sup> as though it were a brag or punchline, turning West's misgivings about buying conspicuous items instead of more practical ones into a brag. Gone is the self-questioning tied to West's conspicuous consumption, replaced instead by a brazen embrace of it.

West's self-interrogation highlights a contradiction between Du Bois's idea of the "talented tenth" and the "rabid materialism" of West's lifestyle. Instead, what West masterfully conveyed on "All Falls Down" in 2004 illustrates new-school hip-hop's materialist locations somewhere between Du Bois's "talented tenth" and Podoshen's "negative outcomes" of conspicuous consumption. What *is* definite, however, is West's undeniable association of conspicuous

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<sup>259</sup> Rich the Kid, "Splashin.'" *Interscope*, 2018.

consumption and *social status*. Next, we will examine Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen's elucidation of the ownership of property and its relations to social status and power.

### 3.2 Consumption and Status

Here, it is helpful to look at hip-hop's fixation on material possessions through the lens of Max Weber's *Power and Social Stratification*. Weber argues that ownership of property – land, especially – is ultimately the basis for all class distinctions:

The mode of distribution gives to the propertied a monopoly on the possibility of transferring property from the sphere of use as 'wealth' to the sphere of 'capital,' that is, it gives them the entrepreneurial function and all chances to share directly or indirectly in returns on capital ... 'property' and 'lack of property' are, therefore, the basic categories of all class situations.<sup>260</sup>

(West's line about buying jewelry instead of a house, as well as Rich the Kid's lyric about buying a convertible instead of a house, then, can be read as a misrecognition of consumption as a marker of class position rather than one of status). Weber's argument that property is the basis for all class distinctions is extended by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899). In it, Veblen argues that the development of the "vicarious leisure class" presented a heightened focus on both leisure and conspicuous consumption as an indicator of class standing:

Both [conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption] are methods of demonstrating the possession of wealth, and the two are conventionally accepted as equivalents.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Max Weber, "The distribution of power within the community: Classes, Stände, Parties." *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10 no. 2, 2010: (137-152,) 139.

<sup>261</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1899: 68-101,) 85-86.  
[https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Veblen/Veblen\\_1899/Veblen\\_1899\\_04.html](https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Veblen/Veblen_1899/Veblen_1899_04.html).

Veblen argues that the conspicuous display of wealth is used to influence the perceptions of others. Wealth, in this case, is not simply about financial security, but also about its benefits as a social function. These social benefits that result from “branding”<sup>262</sup> oneself as wealthy are seen by Veblen to render to an increase in social status:

Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit.<sup>263</sup>

The relationship between consumption and status is illustrated through Veblen’s claim that the inability to consume signifies not only pecuniary deficiency, but a deficiency in “honor” (or Weber’s idea of “status”) as well.

It is also important to consider the gendered aspect that informs Veblen’s argument. Veblen writes that women (and children) occupy a space of *production* that provides wealthy men with the ability to conspicuously consume:

According to the ideal scheme of life in force at the time it is the office of the men to consume what the women produce. Such consumption as falls to the women is merely incidental to their work; it is a means to their continued labour, and not a consumption directed to their own comfort and fulness of life ... The consumption of choice articles of food, and frequently also of rare articles of adornment, becomes tabu to the women and children; and if there is a base (servile) class of men, the tabu holds also for them. With a further advance in culture this tabu may change into simple custom of a more or less rigorous character; but whatever be the theoretical basis of the distinction which is maintained, whether it be a tabu or a larger conventionality, the features of the conventional scheme of consumption do not change easily.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> This term will come up again in my reading of Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*.

<sup>263</sup> Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, 74.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

Here, Veblen details a patriarchal concept of conspicuous consumption in which women (and children) are subordinated to the space of production, whereas men reap these benefits of production that allow them to consume. Evidently, the connection between wealth and conspicuous consumption, is a gendered one as well.

Veblen made these claims over a century ago, but his framework remains applicable for our discussion. With Veblen in mind, we will next examine more progressive contemporary critical discourse surrounding African-American bling culture.

### **3.3 “Rockin’ handcuffs, that’s Ferragamo”: the politics of bling**

Conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas (born 1976), discusses what he understands as his generation’s shift from “soul” to “cool” as indicating a new focus on conspicuous consumption in his essay “Black Cool”:

We were defined by “cool,” an emotionally detached word that provokes a cold response to the world with a narrowly focused ambition for its ice, its bling, and its things... We saw it happening right before our eyes: the Jeffersons, the Cosbys, Jesse Jackson running for president, and Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, and Whitney Houston dominating the airwaves.<sup>265</sup>

“Cool” has elsewhere been discussed in critical discourse as having the potential for political action. Richard Majors and Janet Billson discuss what they call a “cool pose,” a behaviour which they argue is a form of resistance against marginalization for African-Americans – especially men (once again reinforcing Veblen’s concept gendered of conspicuous consumption):

Blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success ... black males, especially those who are young and live in

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<sup>265</sup> Hank Willis Thomas. “Black Cool.” In *Black Cool*, ed. Rebecca Walker. (Soft Skull Press, 2011,) 98.

the inner cities of our nation, have adopted and used cool masculinity – as we prefer to call it, “cool pose” – as a way of surviving in a restrictive society.<sup>266</sup>

Thomas’s claim that “cool” focuses on material possessions (“ice, bling, and its things”<sup>267</sup>) works in tandem with Majors and Bilson’s argument that “cool” is a response to “restrictive society.” Michael P. Jeffries’ book *Thug Life* frames this material fixation as a “coping strategy” in the face of African-American marginalization:

Hood residents do not celebrate flashy clothes and expensive cars because they are embedded in a noble and uniquely expressive black culture; they celebrate luxury items because they are denied traditional paths to positive self-image, and self-and social esteem can only be achieved through purchase and ownership of these goods as a coping strategy.<sup>268</sup>

Jeffries’s connection between “luxury items” and “social esteem” aligns here with Veblen’s contention that the consumption of “excellent goods” is a means of achieving, or at least simulating, “honor.” And, conversely, that one’s inability to conspicuously consume these goods signifies, by Veblen’s terms, “inferiority and demerit.” Similarly, Jeffries goes on to write that the ownership of luxury items is considered to enhance one’s social capital, especially in the black community. Jeffries notes that social capital is yet another form of currency that may be denied to “hood” residents:

Those who cannot consume luxury items are considered less valuable, both financially and socially, than those who can, and in order to know oneself as someone who is valuable, the consumer, especially the black consumer, must possess and use expensive commodities that signal his or her value to others. Mainstream hip-hop in this context becomes a form of escapism, as commercially successful rappers invite their audience to identify with a ridiculous and largely staged life of luxury that ordinary people will never experience.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Richard Majors and Janet Billson *Cool Pose*. (Lexington Books, 1992,) 1-2.

<sup>267</sup> Thomas, “Black Cool,” 98.

<sup>268</sup> Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender and the Meaning of Hip-hop*, 71.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

With this in mind, it is reasonable to argue that conspicuous consumption in hip-hop may have more resistant political ramifications than may appear on the surface. By buying luxury goods, hip-hop practitioners are able to make claims on high cultural items that have most often been associated with the dominant class (usually the rich and white). In his article “The Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic in Contemporary Black Culture,” Mukherjee suggests that the flaunting of elite consumer goods and expensive materials is a form of racial disruption:

The bling aesthetic makes specifically racial claims on commodity markers of white cultural capital -- Cadillac, Harry Winston, Louis Vuitton. Thus, assigning resistant meanings to abiding signifiers of white affluence, it disrupts the racial exclusivity of white access to luxury, wealth, and consumerist excess. Introducing elements of play and pastiche, moreover, bling engages with street economies of knock-offs and counterfeits, dislodging ready standards for authenticating the ‘real thing’ against ‘designer fakes’ and opening up the high-end of commodity culture to poachers, freeloaders, and tricksters. At once vulgar and chic, titillating and threatening, ghetto fabulous bling thus, emerges as a polysemic signifier in post-soul culture, revealing multifarious engagements of race and class in the late capitalist moment.<sup>270</sup>

There are many current black artists that have staked claims in the symbolic goods of the financially and culturally elite. For example, Beyoncé and Jay Z’s “APESHIT” music video (the song also features Migos member Quavo) from June 2018 finds the power-couple “going apeshit” inside the Louvre, a bastion of European high art and high cultural capital that has historically been associated with wealth and whiteness. The wealthy African American couple are dressed at different moments in different expensive outfits and “iced” in dazzling jewelry. Beyoncé lists several luxury goods in the song, including the Parisian retailer Colette and the luxury watchmaker Phillippe Patek in the song, rapping “I got expensive fabrics / I got expensive habits ... / Bought him a jet / Shutdown Colette / Phillippe Patek” with a rhyme scheme and vocal delivery that is

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<sup>270</sup> Roopali Mukherjee, “The Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic in Contemporary Black Culture,” 612-613.

easily identified as a nod to what Chapter 2 identified as the Migos flow. Beyoncé and Jay Z's occupation of the Louvre – the world's largest museum and trove of “one of the most impressive art collections in history”<sup>271</sup> – is one of the more public and deliberate examples of current hip-hop claiming high cultural items and spaces as an assertion of power. The effectiveness of “APESHIT” in, at least temporarily, reordering cultural hierarchies was made clear when *The Guardian* reported that The Louvre experienced a 25% increase in visitors after the hip-hop couple's music video, facilitated in part by The Louvre's own decision to publish a viewer guide *based on the music video*.<sup>272</sup> This suggests an intersection of two distinct (and historically segregated) cultural realms, collapsing the hierarchy of cultures and creating a post-modern synthesis of both. Even Jean-Luc Martinez, the director of the museum, said of French radio, “The Beyoncé video, like the opening of the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi, ensured that the Louvre was talked about across the world, and one of the consequences of that is the spectacular rise in visitor numbers last year.”<sup>273</sup> The fact that Jay Z and Beyoncé are hip-hop/R&B artists – musics which are lower on the hegemonic cultural totem pole than the high art of the Louvre – who have been able to exert tangible influence on the success of the Louvre reinforces the argument that hip-hop culture can reshape the power dynamics between “high” and “low,” thus seeking to reorder societal hierarchies that continue to oppress African-Americans.

New-school hip-hop artists make similar claims on high cultural items. Though the consumption of these items may not be as overtly political as Beyoncé and Jay Z's occupation of

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<sup>271</sup> Jessie Szalay, “The Louvre Museum: Facts, Paintings & Tickets.” *Live Science*. May 2, 2018. <https://www.livescience.com/31935-louvre-museum.html>.

<sup>272</sup> Angelique Chrisafis, “Beyoncé and Jay-Z help Louvre museum break visitor record in 2018.” *The Guardian*. January 3, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/03/beyonce-jay-z-help-louvre-museum-break-visitor-record>.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.



another high cultural entity (the Louvre), they still present political implications than are worth considering. In “Versace,” Offset raps “Rockin’ handcuffs, that’s Ferragamo,” a line which subtly invokes his and his co-stars’ criminal past (and slavery more generally) while simultaneously suggesting a lifestyle that is chained to the trappings of materialism and conspicuous consumption. Instead of police handcuffs, Offset is bound by those of luxury. Indeed, Migos paint a portrait of financial success that is at once fantastical to most of their audience yet very real to Migos. “My diamonds is pissy, my swag is exquisite / Them blue and white diamonds, they look like the Pistons,” Offset raps in “Versace,” linking an African-American dominated sport, professional basketball, to historical markers of white European wealth and status. Their raps are may be outrageous, shocking, or hilarious, and they may display conspicuously consume luxury items, but Migos are very serious about their money: in *Rolling Stone*’s February 2018 cover story on Migos, Offset says, “I want to have generational money ... I got three kids, bro. I need all my kids to be educated and wealthy.”<sup>274</sup> Considering this, Migos can be seen to continue where artists like Eric B. and Rakim and Jay Z left off by furthering the ideal of Black economic advancement in the face of the race and class-based structural violence<sup>275</sup> that surrounds them. This does not necessarily weaken the oppositional position of hip-hop, but may amplify the power struggle between hip-hop as a resistant form and hip-hop as a commercial product.

“Power struggle” is in fact the phrase used by Sarah Banet-Weiser to explore a similar power dynamic in her discussion of street art, another mode of communication that she argues operates as an expressive form imbricated within the capitalist system. She contends that the power

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<sup>274</sup> Offset, “High Times with the Three Kings of Hip-Hop.” Written by Touré, *Rolling Stone* Issue 1306/1307, p. 36. February 8, 2018.

<sup>275</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research* (vol. 6 no. 3. Sage Publications 1969,) 171.

struggle between “emergent modes of creativity” and the demands of “mass market” brand culture is in fact an integral part of authentic expression in contemporary culture:

...maintaining the difference in these spaces [within brand culture] as oppositional is absolutely crucial to contemporary capitalist practices. Ambivalence within the space of culture, in other words, implies a relentless power struggle between emergent modes of creativity and the dominant modes of the market; that power dynamic authorizes the branding of authentic creativity itself.<sup>276</sup>

She goes on to note that the branding of the authentic is not as paradoxical as it may seem, but is rather an unavoidable and essential characteristic of modern Western cultural production: “The branding of the authentic is, in this context, not a misnomer, an oxymoron, or an example of capitalist hypocrisy but rather a defining feature of the contemporary cultural economy in the U.S.”<sup>277</sup> The “branding of the authentic” is a useful phrase in the context of new-school hip-hop. New-school hip-hop operates within the framework that Banet-Weiser elucidates. Migos can be seen to perform a branding of the authentic by invoking luxury items like Versace as a muse for their mode of creativity, finding power by association with high status items.

The rise of the new-school and its bling aesthetic, however, has been the subject of amplified criticism from a wide range of voices, including critics, hip-hop artists, and scholars. Our following examination of the critical “structure of feeling”<sup>278279</sup> surrounding new-school hip-hop will illustrate the conflict in hip-hop discourse between conspicuous consumption and authenticity.

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<sup>276</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in Brand Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 124.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>278</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. (London: Catto & Windus, 1970).

### 3.4 “It’s not about the art form anymore”: new-school criticism

The discourse surrounding the rise of new-school “swag rap” has often been negative. The apparent disregard for hip-hop’s history by new-school rappers continues to be disdained by many of the genre’s pivotal figures. Funk Flex, who in the 90s was the DJ for New York’s very first hip-hop radio show on Hot 97, has voiced on numerous occasions his disdain for new-school rap. In February 2018 he went so far as to call some rappers “wack”<sup>280,281</sup> – a classification which included trap-influenced artists such as Nicki Minaj, Lil Yachty, and, yes, Migos. It’s an intriguing about-face for a DJ who was once known for giving a platform to up-and-coming rappers, but in the broader picture, Flex’s traditionalist view on the state of current hip-hop is shared by many.

Likewise, J. Cole, a multiplatinum “conscious” rapper made his disapproval of the hip-hop new-school known on “1985 – Intro to ‘The Fall Off’,” the closing track of his latest album *K.O.D.* (short for *Kids On Drugs*), in which he raps, “I hear your music and I know that rap’s changed / A bunch of folks would say that that’s a bad thing / ‘Cause everything’s commercial and it’s pop now / Trap drums is the shit that’s hot now.” Cole goes on to rap, “But you forgot you only popped ‘cause you was ridin’ trends / Now you old news and you goin’ through regrets / ‘Cause you never bought that house<sup>282</sup>, but you got a Benz / And a bunch of jewels and a bunch of shoes / And a bunch of fake friends.” While it’s intriguing that J. Cole – whose album *K.O.D.* had sold more

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<sup>280</sup> Aaron A., “Funk Flex Calls Nicki Minaj, G-Eazy & Lil Pump ‘Wack’ Following Diddy’s PSA.” *HotNewHipHop*. February 28, 2018. <https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/funk-flex-calls-out-nicki-minaj-g-eazy-and-lil-pump-as-wack-following-diddys-post-news.44795.html>.

<sup>281</sup> Dictionary.com defines “wack” (slang) as “very bad.”

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/wack>.

<sup>282</sup> Once again we see a connection to Weber’s claim that the ownership of land/property is the basis of class distinctions.

units in its first week than any album since Taylor Swift's *Reputation*,<sup>283</sup> – would criticize new-schoolers for being “commercial,” his lyrics encapsulate with great efficiency the views held by many: That hip-hop now is a. “changed,” b. “commercial,” c. “fake,” and therefore d., “bad.” Perhaps most telling is that Cole synonymizes “pop” and “trap” in his lyric, positioning new-school hip-hop within the realm of “pop,” which, as Elizabeth Eva Leach and others contend,<sup>284</sup> has long been considered the fakest, and therefore lowest, of genres.

J. Cole's assertion that trap drums are “the shit that's hot now” is correct; trap music devices have undoubtedly become prominent among dominant new-school artists. But, as Burton notes, because the values of Southern hip-hop evidently do not align with the values of “Golden Era” hip-hop, Southern hip-hop has a propensity to “come up short” in the hip-hop authenticity discussion:

the South is ready-made to come up short in the authenticity debate, in part because of its overwhelming focus on dance-ready hits, its revolution around chant-driven lyrics, and its rise to national prominence in time with hip hop's conversion from scrappy subgenre to pop lingua franca in the late 90s and early 00s. Southern hip hop stands as the exception to true hip hop, to the black parallel public Kendrick represents.”<sup>285</sup>

Similar attitudes are held by many of hip-hop's most celebrated figures. On May 27, 2015, Wu-Tang Clan's GZA published an open letter called “The Lost Art of Lyricism,” in which he expressed his qualms about the lyrical sea change occurring in hip-hop music. “Rappers aren't grabbing you anymore, it's not pulling me in. What can I get from talking about my car? It's irrelevant. It's not about the art form anymore.”<sup>286</sup> GZA's contention considers hip-hop as an art

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<sup>283</sup> Andrew Unterberger, “J. Cole's First-Week 'KOD' Numbers Prove His Stardom Is Secure as an Albums Artist.” *Billboard*. May 5, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8412977/j-cole-kod-first-week-best-selling-albums-artist>.

<sup>284</sup> Elizabeth Eva Leach, “Vicars of ‘Wannabe’: authenticity and the Spice Girls.” *Popular Music* 20, no. 2 (2001, 143-167).

<sup>285</sup> Burton, *Posthuman Rap*, 68.

<sup>286</sup> GZA, “The Lost Art of Lyricism.”

form first and foremost that has since been corrupted by materialism (“my car”), lowering it from being “about the art form” and into the realm of “irrelevance.” This attitude is shared in the 2015 article “Assuming Niceness: private and public relationships in Drake’s *Nothing Was The Same*,” by Kris Singh and Dale Tracy. They ask, “if rappers are all talking about their ‘money’, ‘bitches’ and ‘swag’, how do they access core emotions with which fans can connect?”<sup>287</sup> Alexis Petridis’s *Guardian* review of Migos’ 2015 album *Yung Rich Nation* encapsulates what is perhaps the most prevalent criticism of Migos’ musical output: that their celebration of conspicuous consumption is not a legitimate subject in a musical context: “It’s just that there’s not much on it that the trio haven’t done already – and for free – unless you count ... a lyrical shift from bragging about how rich and successful they were as crack dealers to bragging about how rich and successful they now are as musicians.”<sup>288</sup> In a *No Ripcord* review of Migos’ 2017 album *Culture* – a work that marked Migos’ arrival as an undeniable powerhouse of commercial and stylistic influence – music critic Juan Edgardo Rodriguez wrote: “It’s not like they’re doing themselves any favors with their low-key trap vibes ... Trap is still very much a singles-oriented endeavour, after all.” Rodriguez’s criticism of trap as a “singles-oriented endeavour” – presumably instead of an album-oriented endeavour – is an example of the common critical view of singles as a disposable medium of “pop” and of the “album” as the ultimate indicator of serious musical worth.<sup>289</sup> Such skepticism towards trap music as a non-album genre is mirrored by the infamous YouTube vlogger Anthony Fantano – aka TheNeedleDrop – in his video review of Travis Scott’s 2015 album *Rodeo*, in which Fantano

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<sup>287</sup> Singh and Tracy, “Assuming niceness: private and public relationships in Drake’s *Nothing Was The Same*,” 105.

<sup>288</sup> Alexis Petridis, “Migos: Yung Rich Nation review – B- boys don’t beat the Beatles.” *The Guardian*. July 30, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/30/migos-yung-rich-nation-b-boys-dont-beat-beatles>.

<sup>289</sup> Miles Parks Grier, “Said the Hooker to the Thief: ‘Some Way Out’ of Rockism.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (25, no. 1, 2013. 31-55,) 31.

states that trap music had not been “album-worthy”<sup>290</sup> prior to Scott’s release. Fantano’s claim in particular demonstrates a clear commitment to an older view of the “album” as the ultimate determinant of musical worth, which has long been the standard by which rock music is measured.<sup>291</sup> Fantano demonstrates both a problematic bias to the genre as a whole, as well as a gaping lack of knowledge of the many albums<sup>292</sup> that developed trap music long before Travis Scott arrived. This attitude was paralleled in *SPIN* Magazine’s review of Migos’ *CULTURE*, an article with the heading “It’s Worth Listening to the Rest of Migos’ *Culture*, Too,” as though it were some sort of pleasant surprise to find musical value beyond their singles. These writings indicate two things: first, that because of new-school hip-hop’s emphasis of conspicuous consumption, it is therefore considered less valuable than hip-hop that prizes the “art of lyricism”<sup>293</sup>, by which listeners can access deeper “emotions.”<sup>294, 295</sup> Coupled with the widely held critical view that musical value should be measured by the quality of the “album,” this does not bode well for new-school hip-hop, which, as we can see, has been dismissed because of its position as a “singles-oriented endeavour.”<sup>296</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Anthony Fantano, “Travis Scott – Rodeo ALBUM REVIEW.” YouTube video.

*Theneedledrop*. September 7, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6t5wV7xmVM>.

<sup>291</sup> Andy Bennett, “‘Heritage rock’: Rock music, representation and heritage discourse.” *Poetics* (37, no. 5-6. 2009, 474-489,) 479.

<sup>292</sup> T.I. *Trap Muzik* (2003), Jeezy *Let’s Get It: Thug Motivation 101* (2005), Gucci Mane *Trap House* (2005) Three 6 Mafia *Most Known Unknown* (2005), Waka Flocka Flame *Flockaveli* (2010).

<sup>293</sup> GZA, “The Lost Art of Lyricism.”

<sup>294</sup> Singh and Tracy, “Assuming Niceness: private and public relationships in Drake’s *Nothing Was The Same*,” 103.

<sup>295</sup> This sentiment is reminiscent of the value that Public Enemy producer Pete Rock places on hip-hop’s ability to teach and educate, as discussed in chapter 1.

<sup>296</sup> Juan Edgardo Rodriguez, “Migos: Culture.” In “Quick Takes (January 2017).” *No Ripcord*, February 13, 2017. <http://www.noripcord.com/features/quick-takes-january-2017>.

Furthermore, some critics continue to value new hip-hop based on whether or not it fulfills certain political priorities. Not only this, but when a hip-hop album *does* fulfill these priorities, it is lauded as something “more” than a hip-hop album, somehow transcending the perceived limitations of this genre distinction (and thereby reinforcing longstanding critical dismissals of hip-hop as art). For example, in his five-star review of Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp A Butterfly*, *cokemachineglow*’s Chet Betz writes three different times that the album is “not a rap album,” implying that the classification does not do it justice: “There is craft here (and in fact this is the most musical mainstream rap record since *Aquemini*<sup>297</sup>).”<sup>298</sup> *The New York Times* wrote that “at its best, [*TPAB* is] a howling work of protest art.”<sup>299</sup> The point here is not to dispute Lamar’s greatness, but rather to highlight a critical consensus that hip-hop music is at its best when it is political and thus aligns most explicitly with preconceived ideals of hip-hop authenticity. Keightley notes that rock music has long been considered valuable because it is widely believed to transcend mere “entertainment.”<sup>300</sup> It follows, then, that much of the aforementioned criticism of the new-school is linked to rockist values – values which rest on the idea that in order to be authentic (and therefore good), the music must succeed in its attempt to rescuing its “pure” qualities from its apolitical and commercially-bound, and therefore “impure” characteristics. Discussing hip-hop, Bogazianos describes

“efforts to parse out the ‘good’ aspects from the ‘bad,’ the original purity from the commercial, as well as the offensive from the political ... Rap, that is, remains, for many people, something to be reclaimed from the pressures of commerce and used

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<sup>297</sup> *Aquemini* is the third studio album by Atlanta duo OutKast and is widely regarded as a classic.

<sup>298</sup> Chet Betz, “Kendrick Lamar: To Pimp a Butterfly | Records.” *cokemachineglow*. March 25, 2015. <http://cokemachineglow.com/records/kendricklamar-topimpabutterfly-2015/>.

<sup>299</sup> Jon Caramanica, “Kendrick Lamar, Emboldened, but Burdened, by Success.” *The New York Times*. March 17, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/arts/music/kendrick-lamar-emboldened-but-burdened-by-success.html>.

<sup>300</sup> Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 133.

to reinvigorate the political potential of hip hop culture that is believed to have been diluted.”<sup>301</sup>

Attempts to juxtapose hip-hop’s “good” qualities with its “bad” ones are common in modern hip-hop discourse; while artists such as Kendrick Lamar are lauded for their participation in the socially progressive genre tradition of acts such as Public Enemy, numerous new-school artists are subjected to critical scrutiny because they are perceived to not share the same sentiments. If Kendrick represents the Platonic ideal of a modern rap artist, Migos and trap music are often treated as the antithesis. While Lamar’s music is politically charged, relentlessly confrontational, and constantly self-aware, Migos, one might say, seem decadent, brash, and politically unconcerned. On one hand, Kendrick stands atop a police car on the BET Awards show stage rapping “All Right,” a song that has become a mantra of the Black Lives Matter movement. He trudges onto the Grammys stage bound in chains, clad in slave’s clothes and surrounded by dozens of others just like him before giving a blistering rendition of his song “The Blacker The Berry.” Whereas, on the other hand, Migos’ cars are German luxury sedans, their chains are diamond-encrusted, and their clothes are brand-name: “Versace, my neck and my wrist is so sloppy / Versace Versace, I love it, Versace, the top of my Audi,” Quavo raps on “Versace.” The dichotomy could not be more evident – police cars versus luxury cars, diamond chains instead of slave chains, brand name clothes rather than rags.

Evidently, much of the dismissal of hip-hop’s materialist and conspicuously consumptive new-school is informed by the dichotomy between what hip-hop “used” to be versus what it is now. New-school artists, however, have established different criteria for authenticity that, in a distinctly punk fashion, reject some aspects of rock tradition while embracing others.

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<sup>301</sup> Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, 61.



Though Keightley describes the growing concern in the late 1970s that punk rock signified the destruction of rock tradition, he argues that punk rockers were ultimately *continuing* the rock tradition of authenticity through differentiation: “punk music was simply fulfilling rock’s traditional investment in differentiation and authenticity, distinguishing itself from the rock mainstream.”<sup>302</sup> Considering this, it is worth discussing the various ways by which new-school hip-hop artists have actively participated in rock tradition in recent years. After further examination, it will become clear that new-school hip-hop artists such as Migos embody a mode of rock authenticity by perpetuating aspects of both rock and punk traditions.

### **3.5 “*We the rockstars!*”: hip-hop as the new rock**

I have discussed ways by which conspicuous consumption and status in African-American hip-hop have served to reorder cultural hierarchies. Next, I analyzed critical discourse surrounding new-school hip-hop that dismisses this music as both an estrangement from the upward aspiration of moguls Jay Z and from the politically-driven output of artists such as Kendrick Lamar. This discussion illuminated the common perception that this inferiority is due in large part to new-school hip-hop’s celebration of conspicuous consumption. In this section, I will examine the increasingly popular phenomenon granting level of authenticity through its framing as “the new rock & roll.” It will become apparent that hip-hop’s historical trajectory shares some similarities with that of rock, which will then help contextualize subsequent discussion of new-school hip-hop as a modern iteration of some of punk’s most foundational attitudes.

One of the more noticeable threads in the discourse surrounding new-school hip-hop is the common assertion that hip-hop is “the new rock and roll.” Kanye West made this claim in his

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<sup>302</sup> Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 138.

(in)famous 2013 interview with BBC's Zane Lowe, in which he passionately declared, "*We the culture. Rap the new rock n' roll! We the rock stars!*"<sup>303</sup> Similar sentiments about hip-hop as the new rock & roll have been echoed by several non-hip-hop artists as well, including Maroon 5's Adam Levine<sup>304</sup> and metal band Bring Me the Horizon's Oli Sykes<sup>305</sup>. Label executives have made similar claims too. Brian Ahern, co-head of William Morris Entertainment (WME)<sup>306</sup> told *Business Insider*: "the Travis Scotts of the world are rock stars ... The Kendrick Lamars are rock stars... It doesn't mean you're not a rock star if you just rap now."<sup>307</sup> Later, he adds, hip-hop is "so across the board accepted now [that] it's grown to a place where it's probably the new rock and roll."<sup>308</sup> Claims such as these demand further inquiry. Closer examination of scholarly popular music studies texts surrounding rock music will prove useful in clarifying aspects of rock and punk authenticity. I will then argue that the emergence of punk in the 1970s parallels the emergence of Southern new-school hip-hop as the dominant force in the 2010s. This will serve to provide a better understanding of new-school hip-hop's significance as a dominant musical force in 2019. As we will see, this parallel is visible and audible in many ways.

First, it is necessary to briefly consider rock music's transformation from the 1960s and

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<sup>303</sup> Kanye West, "Kanye West. Zane Lowe. Part 1." YouTube video. *BBC Radio 1*. September 23, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2T0fMkZoMo>.

<sup>304</sup> Feyyaz Ustaer. "Maroon 5's Adam Levine: 'Hip-hop is the new rock n' roll. Travis Scott is the new punk rock'." *Metalhead Zone*. February 5, 2019. <https://metalheadzone.com/maroon-5s-adam-levine-hip-hop-is-the-new-rock-n-roll-travis-scott-is-the-new-punk-rock/>.

<sup>305</sup> Andrew Trendell. "Bring Me the Horizon's Oli Sykes: 'Rap is almost the new punk, rock's gone soft and boring'." *NME*. December 6, 2018. <https://www.nme.com/news/music/bring-me-the-horizon-oli-sykes-rap-almost-new-punk-rocks-gone-soft-boring-2417319>.

<sup>306</sup> WME's clientele includes Rihanna, Drake, Adele, Oprah Winfrey, Ryan Reynolds, Serena Williams, and LeBron James.

<sup>307</sup> Alison Millington, "A music executive at one of the world's biggest talent agencies says hip hop is the new rock and roll, and Travis Scott is the new rock star." *Business Insider*. March 23, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/wme-music-executive-brian-ahern-hip-hop-new-rock-and-roll-travis-scott-rock-star-2019-3>.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

into the punk era of the 70s. In his article “Reconsidering Rock,” Keightley argues that the emergence of rock music indicated a reordering of cultural hierarchies, allowing for the expression of “oppositional sensibilities” within commercial and mass-mediated systems: “Rock helped to reorder the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures, producing something that was simultaneously marginal and mainstream, anti-mass and mass, subordinate and dominant.”<sup>309</sup> Many scholars have also pointed to the presence of an enthusiastic mass youth audience as providing the context for rock “authenticity,” defining it in opposition to an economically dominant “adult” culture.<sup>310</sup> In addition to the power of this youth audience, which Keightley reads as a “socially marginalised”<sup>311</sup> demographic, rock’s rise benefitted from the “purchasing power” of a young audience, granting economic legitimacy to the music.<sup>312</sup> The mere presence, however, of a large young audience does not necessarily mean “rock,” – as Grossberg writes in “Is There Rock after Punk? “Rock and roll does not belong to everyone, and not everything is rock and roll.”<sup>313</sup> Instead, Grossberg contends in the same article that rock and roll revels in a concept of “youth” as a resistant and transformative power: “Rock and roll celebrates youth, not merely as a chronological measure but as a difference defined by the rejection of the boredom of the “straight” world. The politics of youth celebrate change, risk and instability; the very structures of boredom become the sites of new forms of empowerment.”<sup>314</sup> Grossberg thereby understands rock as a countercultural force. Similarly, In *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, Ryan Moore argues that rock emerged

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<sup>309</sup> Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 141.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>313</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, “Is there rock after punk?” In *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (Routledge, 2000. ProQuest Ebook Central,) 95. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/lib/west/detail.action?docID=253949>.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 96.

in the 1960s as a unified rebellion against Fordism<sup>315</sup> and embedded liberalism.<sup>316</sup> He notes that by the mid-1970s, however, rock music had splintered into a hodgepodge of subcultures that did not necessarily share the anti-Fordist ideals of the 1960s. Gone was the perceived unified ideology of the “rock” during its rise, replaced instead by an assortment of subcultures, including punk. Moore writes: “Punk arrived in this context with the message that rock music was corrupted and possibly even ‘dead’.”<sup>317</sup>

In *Punk Rock: So What?* Robert Garnett argues that at its best – which he considers to be the Sex Pistols – punk was especially invested in negating the practices of pop, invoking their “purposeful disinvestment in anything that pop had previously represented.”<sup>318</sup> Punk was, therefore, in many ways a rejection of the music that came before it, a deliberate assertion of power through disassociation with tradition. The rise of punk also spurred a widespread concern that rock and roll had “died,” as evidenced in Lawrence Grossberg’s inquiry “Is there rock after punk?”<sup>319</sup> In “Reconsidering Rock,” Keightley also notes that many shared this view: “In the 1970s, punk was seen as the antithesis of rock, a mortal enemy intent on destroying rock culture.”<sup>320</sup>

Hip-hop’s historical trajectory shares similarities with this narrative. Both rock and hip-hop are considered to have emerged in their early years as unified social forces with common political interests in their respective communities (though I have argued that this claim is somewhat simplistic for hip-hop). Hip-hop’s crossover in the mid-1980s led to the

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<sup>315</sup> Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis*. (New York: New York University Press, 2010,) 6.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>318</sup> Robert Garnett, “Too Low to be Low.” In *Punk Rock: So What?*, ed. Roger Sabin. (London: Routledge, 1999), 22.

<sup>319</sup> Grossberg, “Is there rock after punk?”

<sup>320</sup> Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 138.

splintering of the genre, producing subsequent subcultures that at times presented political views that did not necessarily align with the civil-rights generation politics of The Golden Age's Public Enemy. Instead, this splintering helped develop new conceptions of black identity and hip-hop authenticity that at times broke from tradition. Ultimately, this is an example of the different conceptions of authenticity that can arise out of a genre's crossover.

Crunk music is important in this discussion of hip-hop and punk music. Like punk music, crunk offered sensibilities surrounding authenticity that differed from its genre's predecessors. Like punk at its "purest," the attitude that some new-school acts project is seen by many as a betrayal of the culture that birthed it, a reversal of the resistance propagated by N.W.A. and Public Enemy back in the 1980s and continued more recently by, say, Kendrick Lamar or J. Cole. Crunk pioneer Lil Jon proves central to this given his influence on the favoured production styles and chant-based lyrics of new-school hip-hop.<sup>321</sup> His influence as a "punk"-like figure is apparent in the worldview of many new-school hip-hop artists. Indeed, given the stylistic shift of mainstream hip-hop foreshadowed by Lil Jon, Migos and subsequent acts such as Lil Yachty have intensified the perpetual "old-school vs. new-school" hip-hop debate.<sup>322</sup> This is most observable in Lil Yachty's provocative 2016 comment that he "honestly couldn't name five songs from Tupac and Biggie,"<sup>323</sup> after which he cited Drake as the superior artist. Yachty's statement signifies a resistance to the historical knowledge of hip-hop, indicating an apparent lack of interest in sharing

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<sup>321</sup> Max Weinstein, "The Return of Lil Jon and Why It's No Surprise." *The Boombox*. July 2, 2014. <https://theboombox.com/lil-jon-turn-down-for-what-interview/>.

<sup>322</sup> Travus Leroux, "The Age Old Question New School vs Old School." *Beat*. December 4, 2017. <https://beat.media/the-age-old-question-new-school-vs-old-school>.

<sup>323</sup> Shenequa Golding, "Lil Yachty Says He Doesn't Know Five Songs From Biggies Or Tupac." *Vibe*. September 2017, 2016. <https://www.vibe.com/2016/08/lil-yachty-biggie-tupac>.

solidarity with some of the genre's most canonical figures. Yachty's claim can be read as a distinctly "punk" sentiment as it shares a similar rejection of canons and genre tradition which punk also practiced in the 1970s.

Many new-school hip-hop artists are evidently influenced by rock tradition. Lil Uzi Vert, author of the billion-streamed hit "XO TOUR Llif3," has almost nine million Instagram followers but follows *only* the heavy metal icon Marilyn Manson. New-school artists Post Malone and 21 Savage broke streaming records with their song "Rockstar,"<sup>324</sup> whose hook goes, "I'm feelin' like a rockstar." Migos, however, can be seen as especially active participants in rock tradition. In their music video for "What The Price" from their 2017 album *CULTURE*, don studded leather jackets with band patches sewn on, while the song's producer Zaytoven stands atop an overturned car, playing the keytar as though he is in a cock-rock band. Zaytoven's demeanour here can be better understood in the context of Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's "Rock and Sexuality," in which they describe cock-rock as "an explicit, crude and often aggressive expression of male sexuality."<sup>325</sup> This reading echoes my discussion of the "Versace" video above, in which Migos similarly assert power through the performance of hypermasculinity not unlike that of the rock tradition, which, as Frith and McRobbie note, often is a means of "sexual control" through the performance of hyperbolized traditional gender roles.<sup>326</sup>

Migos lay claim to rock tradition at several other points in the video. At one point, Migos walk into a biker bar decked in biker gear, then proceed to sit down and drink Royal Elite vodka

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<sup>324</sup> Chris Danforth, "Post Malone's New Album Broke Another Spotify Streaming Record." *Highsnobiety*. May 06, 2018. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/post-malone-spotify-streaming-record/>.

<sup>325</sup> Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality." 5. In *Taking Popular Music Seriously*, 43.

<sup>326</sup> Frith and McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality." 17, 55.

as though they'd been coming to that bar their entire adult lives. This is a very direct and very literal example of current hip-hop stars claiming space that has historically been associated with canonized – and mostly white, male – rock artists. By adopting aesthetic tropes that are commonly associated with punk and rock acts like Ramones and the Sex Pistols, Migos reinforce Kanye West's assertion that hip-hop artists are "the rockstars." Evidently, new-school hip-hop artists thereby challenge the structure of old-school critical hegemony by rejecting some of the most celebrated aspects of hip-hop tradition. In addition, this attitude can be read to parallel punk's historical antipathy to 1960s countercultural rock.

Indeed, for a large portion of their audience, Migos fulfill cultural priorities that are significantly more relevant and necessary than the sentiments brought forth by a group of middle-class British boys who were at peak influence over half a century ago. The ideal of economic empowerment that Migos and "Versace" perform seeks specifically to disrupt the class-based social hierarchy that Bourdieu describes through the acquisition and dominion over cultural entities such as Versace, Ferragamo, and the Beatles that are considered to be higher than trap music on the cultural hierarchy. In his article "Entertainment and Utopia," Richard Dyer refuses the traditional opposition of art and entertainment, politics and fun by describing entertainment as "the stuff of utopia"<sup>327</sup>, arguing that it "offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide."<sup>328</sup> He goes on to contend that as long as "scarcity holds sway,"<sup>329</sup> consumption will remain a central, implicitly political, facet of entertainment.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*. (London: Routledge, 2002), 20.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

Pierre Bourdieu's "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste," provides insight into the relationship between "scarcity"<sup>331</sup> and cultural taste. In it, he argues that cultural "taste" is largely predetermined by factors such as class and education, leading to a social hierarchy not only of the cultural goods in question, but of its consumers as well:

Through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose, the different ways of relating to realities and fictions, of believing in fictions and the realities they simulate, with more or less distance and detachment, are very closely linked to the different possible positions in social space and, consequently, bound up with the systems of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of the different classes and class fractions.<sup>332</sup>

Bourdieu's framework is helpful when considering Migos as the new rock stars; indeed, discourse surrounding Migos make it evident that they speak for an important class fraction whose needs have too often been ignored. This is most visible in the series of articles from 2014 that likened Migos to the Beatles, some going so far to posit that Migos are in fact the "better" group: Quavo's line "I'm in London with the plug, getting' the same car as the Beatles" from the "Versace" follow-up single "Hannah Montana" sparked a series of tweets and articles from prevalent figures in the hip-hop community, many of which claimed that Migos were the superior act. Many of these ruminations were tongue-in-cheek – "the beatles were influential maybe but they never did the migos flow, so"<sup>333</sup> – but, as Judnick Mayard elucidates in his *Complex* article "The Migos > Beatles Jokes Are Very Serious," there is a sincerity (and a politics) that underpins this notion: "The truth is, Migos are relevant to everyone in 2014... The Beatles do not speak for a universal experience. I'm a NEGRO in AMERIKKKA. I am not afforded the luxury to "IMAGINE." I live within the

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>332</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. (Harvard University Press, 1984), 5-6.

<sup>333</sup> Edwin Ortiz, "These People on Twitter Believe Migos are Better than the Beatles." *Complex*. October 20, 2016. <https://www.complex.com/music/2014/10/these-people-on-twitter-believe-migos-are-better-than-the-beatles/>.



STRUGGLE.” Given Migos’ sprawling effect on the sound of Top 40 radio, it proves difficult to disagree with Mayard’s assertion that Migos are indeed in some way relevant to nearly everybody, especially in 2019. Mayard also uses the rather utopian message of “Imagine” to frame the Beatles’ musical output as a much more privilege-based enterprise than Migos’s rags-to-riches narrative. Indeed, this notion gained a heightened magnitude in February 2018 when, following the release of their album *CULTURE II*, Migos tied The Beatles for the most simultaneous entries on the *Billboard* Hot 100 list ever.<sup>334</sup> One can chalk this up as mere coincidence, or as a symptom of the changing listening analytics as a result of music streaming, but in any case, it is apparent that Migos occupy a space comprised of mass youth taste and commercial supremacy that harkens back to the success of the Beatles 60 years ago.

### 3.6 New-school and the new pop

Here in 2019, the portrait of hip-hop is as complicated and ambiguous as ever. On one hand, Kendrick is seen as the hip-hop saviour, a Compton kid turned superstar who is praised for his “authenticity,” which he maintains in large part through his politically-driven output. On the other hand, there are Migos, three young African-American men who rose from the drug trade of Lawrenceville, Georgia. Their music is at first glance comparatively apolitical and not particularly invested in the “black power” tradition of hip-hop pioneered by N.W.A. and Tupac and perpetuated by the likes of Kendrick. Nevertheless, Migos are, as Touré writes in his *Rolling Stone* profile, “arguably the most influential group – in any genre – of the past few years”<sup>335</sup>. Hip-hop is the most

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<sup>334</sup> Xander Zellner, “Migos Tie The Beatles for Most Simultaneous Hot 100 Entries Among Groups.” *Billboard*. February 5, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8098099/migos-the-beatles-simultaneous-hot-100-hits>.

<sup>335</sup> Touré, “High Times With the Kings of Hip-Hop,” 36.

listened-to genre in the United States,<sup>336</sup> and at its vanguard is a vibrant school of money-stacking, iced-out rappers. Southern artists in particular are more popular than ever: For example, Future's codeine-drenched use of AutoTune is the default style for a substantial swath of new artists, while Rae Sremmurd's music – most notably “Black Beatles,” a very successful mainstream hit – continues to force hip-hop and rock conventions to confront each other by incorporating common musical and visual aspects of each into their music<sup>337</sup>. Young Thug is pushing the boundaries of lyrical and vocal delivery in a trap context while also scoring high profile guest features on more traditional pop songs like Camila Cabello's 2017 smash “Havana.”

Looking at the current musical landscape in the context of Migos' ascent, it is evident that Migos and their peers have done far more than establish trap music as a powerful genre in its own right. Besides the fact that trap artists such as Migos, Lil Uzi Vert and Future continue to perform well on the Billboard Charts,<sup>338</sup> trap devices such as prevalent hi-hats, offbeat snares, and heavy 808s have become increasingly noticeable among non-hip-hop artists. In addition, the “Migos flow,” or “triplet flow” (as discussed in chapter 2) has now become common stylistic facet of a wide swath of the pop music industry's most ubiquitous voices. As the trap-driven rhythmic features of hit singles such as Justin Bieber's “Sorry” and Lana Del Rey's “Summer Bummer” indicate, trap music has in recent years had a drastic effect on pop music. In addition, Del Rey's inclusion of new-school guest star Playboi Carti on “Summer Bummer,” in tandem with her

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<sup>336</sup> Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender and the Meaning of Hip-hop*, 71.

<sup>337</sup> Besides the song's title, which stakes an obvious claim in rock tradition, the music video finds them on a stage playing electric guitars clad in tight leather clothes. At one point in the song, Rae Sremmurd member Swae Lee raps, “I'm a fuckin' black Beatle ... Rockin' John Lennon lenses.”

<sup>338</sup> *Billboard* 200, June 2, 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/archive/charts/2018/billboard-200>.

adoption of the triplet flow on the track, signals a commitment to hip-hop conventions that have increasingly shaped the sounds of Top 40 radio.

On Bieber's "Sorry," from 2015, produced by Diplo and Skrillex, Bieber relies heavily on triplet flow for the majority of his verses. "Let me redeem oh redeem oh myself tonight," he sings, mirroring the repetition-heavy triplet flow that Migos are known for. Not only this, but in the song's pre-chorus section, Diplo and Skrillex utilize one of trap's most common snare sounds to drive the highly rhythmic buildup.

Lana Del Rey's 2017 single "Summer Bummer" is a step even further in this direction. Featuring A\$AP Rocky and Playboi Carti, both of whom are known for their distinct modulations of new-school flow, the song is undeniably trap. An ominous, buzzing 808 sub bass dominates the song's pulverizing low end while multifarious trap drums carry the main piano loop forward. In the song's pre-chorus, Lana Del Rey also makes extensive use of the "Versace" triplet technique while Carti chirps ad-libs – a common stylistic feature of new-school trap – in the background. Indeed, "Summer Bummer" can be seen as one of the more distinct moments in which post-"Versace" trap and mainstream pop collided – or even a moment when the distinction dissolved.

The growing convergence of trap with pop is further reflected in Elias Leight's August 2018 *Rolling Stone* article "Ariana Grande's 'Sweetener' Proves that Trap Is the New Pop." He discusses Max Martin – whom Leight notes is probably the most successful pop producer of the last twenty years or so – and his employment of trap devices on Ariana Grande's hit album *Sweetener*: "That trap's structures have made their way to a figure like Martin, who has had more success in the Top 40 than anybody over the past few decades, is proof that those skittering drums

and chest-shaking basslines are now simply the vocabulary of popular music writ large.”<sup>339</sup> This is audible not only in the musical production, but in their voices as well. Leight describes the influence of trap flows of Grande’s vocal delivery on her song “Everytime”:

At first Grande delivers an unyielding staccato rap, but she abruptly returns to supple singing on the line-ending phrase “back to you;” the effect is like a boxer following a series of short jabs with an uppercut. As more and more pop singers are forced to reckon with trap, the fusion achieved on “Everytime” offers them a path forward.<sup>340</sup> (Leight 2018)

Leight further notes that in addition to Grande, other mainstream pop stars with little to no historical or generic connection to hip-hop such as Selena Gomez, Taylor Swift, Demi Lovato, and Kelly Clarkson have all transitioned at least partially to recordings with trap-centric characteristics.

This path forward suggests an even further rearrangement of the terms of “realness” in hip-hop as its devices become ever more prevalent in the mainstream. The fact that trap music devices have framed the sound of modern pop has evidently raised concern for some, as previously discussed with J. Cole’s “everything’s commercial and it’s pop now” verse in “1985.” In addition, some scholars such as Jason Toynbee contend that expanding the market for subcultural forms can have serious repercussions:

Marketing a genre beyond its home territory may subvert the original context of production as musicians learn to please a new and diffuse audience. Sometimes musical communities are eliminated altogether as hegemonic genres swamp the market and drive out locally made sounds; or authentic sounds may be appropriated by musicians from outside and refashioned in a profoundly inauthentic way.<sup>341</sup>

Of course, stories of hegemonic appropriation of subcultural sounds are all too common, and have been present regarding the rise of enormously popular white new-school artists such as Post

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<sup>339</sup> Elias Leight, “Ariana Grande’s ‘Sweetener’ Proves that Trap Is the New Pop.” *Rolling Stone*. August 17, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/ariana-grandes-sweetener-proves-that-trap-is-the-new-pop-712838/>.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*, 116.

Malone. He earned his share of criticism for his statement “I’m not a rapper. I’m an artist”<sup>342</sup> – a claim which does not exactly look good for someone who became famous due to his trap-indebted ballad “White Iverson.” However, these conflicts don’t appear to bother Migos: when Sean Evans, host of *First We Feast*’s Youtube series “Hot Ones” asked Offset if he knew what it takes to make a hit, Offset, without batting an eye, said,

“Yes: the Migos flow. See, if you haven’t noticed, every song that come out, you need it ... it’s like life support... At one point in your career as an artist, you gonna use that flow. And with hip-hop being the biggest genre, sometimes these pop artists and these country artists come in and then they don’t really know how to rap, so they use that.”<sup>343</sup>

As he says it, Offset does not appear to share the concerns of J. Cole or Toynbee – in fact, the glint in his eye and the hint of a knowing smile on his face suggest that he looks *proud* to be saying it, as he sits adorned in diamonds and Gucci apparel.

### 3.7 Takeover

Nelson George wrote 20 years ago that despite a long history of appropriation and corporate co-opting, hip-hop has long been able to navigate various forms of exploitation without losing its edge: “Somehow hip hop survives even the crassest commercialism or, at least, it has so far.”<sup>344</sup> This claim still stands over two decades later; despite the criticism that Migos and other new-schoolers face for their embrace of “crass commercialism,” I argued that hip-hop’s various successes would have occurred if not for those invested in its commercialization rather than its politics. In *The Big Payback*, Charnas posits that the very

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<sup>342</sup> Post Malone, “Here’s Why Post Malone is a Problem.” Written by Shawn Setaro. *Complex*, Nov. 27, 2017. <https://www.complex.com/music/2017/11/post-malone-and-racism>.

<sup>343</sup> Offset, “Offset Screams Like Ric Flair While Eating Spicy Wings | Hot Ones.”

<sup>344</sup> George, *Hip-hop America*, 155.

fact of hip-hop's commercial prowess is momentous in itself, arguing that hip-hop's ever-expanding reach points to the success of its power to disrupt the social order:

'Hip-hop succeeded not by being correct. It succeeded by being.' In its materialistic ubiquity, hip-hop won. While hip-hop's critics bemoaned the text, they forgot the power of the subtext: Twenty years ago, no rappers in the top twenty. This year [2011] they are ten of the top twenty. In 2003, for the first time in history, every artist in the Billboard Top 10 was Black; most of their fans were White. This isn't crossover anymore. It is takeover. America has officially been remixed.<sup>345</sup>

Charnas's notion of a hip-hop "takeover" can also be read in the light of Du Bois's idea of economic empowerment, now understood as market dominance. Of course, not every hip-hop artist is African-American, and most labels are still white-owned. But the numbers are still striking. Indeed, the statistical trends of the last five years has seen a marked increase in hip-hop's commercial dominance. Let us return to the chart from the introduction:

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<sup>345</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, 637.



**Hip Hop By The Numbers** @HipHopNumbers · Apr 11



2018: Hip-Hop had 43 Hot 100 top 10s

126.3% increase on 2017

53% higher than 2004 (28)

55% of 2018 Hot 100 top 10s were hip-hop, highest this decade

2010: 20%

2011: 30%

2012: 11%

2013: 16%

2014: 9%

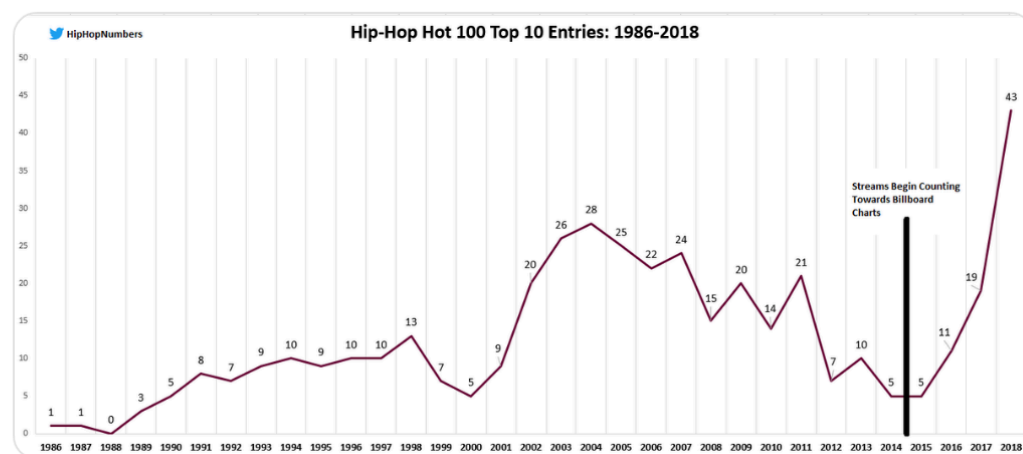
2015: 9%

2016: 19%

2017: 29%

2018: 55%

Is Hip-Hop now Pop?



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It is instructive, therefore, not to dismiss hip-hop's new-school by comparing it to what hip-hop used to be, but rather to seek a deeper understanding of the ever-changing forces and contradictions that continue to fuel its industry dominance. With this in mind while returning to the previously

<sup>346</sup> Hip Hop By The Numbers, April 11, 2019. @HipHopNumbers.  
<https://twitter.com/HipHopNumbers/status/1116461678713950208>

discussed criticism of hip-hop's post-"Versace" "new school," it becomes clearer that contemporary hip-hop is not necessarily frivolous, nor does its "takeover" signify the "death" of lyricism. It is most certainly "album-worthy," however pointless that title may be (especially in the face of streaming services' effects on how people listen to music in 2019).<sup>347</sup> All of these criticisms rest on the assumption which Stuart Hall so vehemently fought against: that Black art "should" hold a certain political position, and only if it does so will it be celebrated (e.g., Kendrick) and if it does not, it is dismissed as a betrayal (e.g., Lil Yachty) of what black people "should" be doing to combat the racial inequalities that have pervaded the United States since its conception (italics my own):

a certain kind of politics that defends the race, tries to protect us against discrimination, etcetera, in which all black people will be figured as people who are holding the correct position. *And when you ask what positions do they hold what you will respond is not the normal political argument: "well they believe in the following things which I think are viable and progressive things for black people to vie for now in order to change their circumstances."* You will say well they're like that, they think like that because that's how black people think, its right that black people should – [sic]. So it's right that these functions act as a kind of guarantee that the work of art will be good because it's black *and will be politically progressive because it's black.*<sup>348</sup>

To impose such restrictions on hip-hop is equally problematic and impossible. Instead, Migos can be read as manifesting the aspiration that Du Bois defends. Look at their outfits at the 2018 Grammy Awards, each of them wearing matching but slightly different black jackets, imbued with ornate gold patterns and designs. Their necks are adorned with dazzling silver and gold chains that are encrusted generously with diamonds. Their long dreadlocks hang past their shoulders. One only has to take a single look to ascertain that nothing about Migos' swagger is suppressed. Should

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<sup>347</sup> Sam Wolfson, "'We've Got More Money Swirling Around': How Streaming Saved the Music Industry." *The Guardian*. April 24, 2018.

<sup>348</sup> Stuart Hall, "Race: The Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall." YouTube video. *BlackOups*. June 25, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtkTkdiF5ZY>



hip-hop artists be expected to endlessly toil in the aesthetic fields of the same old street-hardened delivery and overtly political subject matter as their forefathers did? In “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois asks similar questions:

Is it fair, is it decent, is it Christian to ignore these facts of the Negro problem, to belittle such aspiration, to nullify such leadership and seek to crush these people back into the mass out of which by toil and travail, they and their fathers have raised themselves?”<sup>349</sup>

Here, Du Bois is suggesting the moral injustice of “belittling” African-American aspiration towards economic empowerment and leadership. As we have seen, belittlement and “nullification” of the symbols of financial success has been a central tenet of new-school hip-hop criticism. Instead, I argue that the significance of Migos, new-school and conspicuous consumption can be illuminated through the lens of Jacques Attali’s ideas in *Noise: the political economy of music*, in which he argues, (italics in original), “Music appears in myth as *an affirmation that society is possible*. That is the essential thing. Its order simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities. *The code of music simulates the accepted rules of society*.”<sup>350</sup> By subverting the hierarchies of an social order, new-school hip-hop music can be seen not only to simulate, but to possibly inform a potential, new social order. Though new-school hip-hop operates in very different locations from the old, new-school artists ultimately continue hip-hop tradition, expressing marginalities and in turn that working to reorganize social hierarchies.

### 3.8 Chapter 3 summary

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<sup>349</sup> Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth.”

<sup>350</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: the political economy of music*. (Minneapolis, Minnesota): University of Minnesota, 2014), 29.

This chapter began by discussing negative criticism surrounding conspicuous consumption in the African-American and hip-hop community. However, as, I argued, the ownership of luxury items by “hood residents”<sup>351</sup> carries more political connotations than may at first appear. Invoking Veblen, I argued the ability to consume conspicuously has long been considered an assertion of social esteem and honor. Jeffries, Thomas, and others support this argument by contending that the ownership of luxury items is a “coping strategy,” an act of resistance for “hood residents” who “are denied traditional paths to positive self-image, and self-and social esteem.”<sup>352</sup> To illustrate this, I used Jay Z and Beyoncé’s “APESHIT” as an example of modern hip-hop artists claiming high status cultural items and spaces (Philippe Patek, The Louvre) as a means of asserting power.

Sarah Banet-Weiser’s framework regarding authenticity within brand culture is helpful in understanding the position of new-school hip-hop as both as resistant form and a participant in the capitalist system. She argues that though this “power struggle” may seem contradictory, it is ultimately a key influence in “the branding of the authentic,” which she considers to be vital to authentic modern expression. Migos clearly embody this idea by once again rearranging social hierarchies through their celebration of conspicuous consumer items that have historically been unavailable to “hood residents.”

Next, I elucidated the many examples of critical dismissal of new-school hip-hop. It became clear that one of the common threads in this negative reception pertains to artists’ display of conspicuous consumption in the music as inherently anti- or a-political. Simultaneously, several high-profile music industry members have hailed modern rap stars as the new rock stars. With this in mind, the subsequent discussion attempted to understand new-school hip-hop’s current position

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<sup>351</sup> Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender and the Meaning of Hip-hop*

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

by examining scholarly discourse surrounding aspects of both rock and punk during their respective rises.

After this examination, it became apparent that new-school hip-hop artists participate in the rock tradition of often utopian social reorganization via popular music practice. This is evident in the nature of new-school hip-hop's youth dominated audience, who, as Grossberg wrote of rock, "celebrate change, risk and instability; the very structures of boredom become the sites of new forms of empowerment."<sup>353</sup> This youth attitude of change and instability is reflected in the rejection of hip-hop tradition encapsulated most clearly with Lil Yachty's comments about Biggie and Tupac's supposed inferiority to Drake. Considering this, I posited that, like punk music, which Keightley argued continued rock tradition's "investment in differentiation and authenticity,"<sup>354</sup> new-school hip-hop shares a similar worldview. New-school hip-hop artists ultimately participate in hip-hop tradition by seeking non-traditional ways to reorder dominant social hierarchies.

Finally, I argued that it is therefore problematic to value new-school hip-hop based on old models of politically-based authenticity. To do so is to impose criterion that are, as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy argue, are ultimately untenable, as they are often based at their core on ugly assumptions surrounding race and class. Instead, new-school hip-hop can be read as a reclamation on many levels. It was central to ushering in a new wave of hip-hop music that places heavy emphasis on triplet flow and economic empowerment through the reclamation of "high" cultural goods. Migos and other new-school hip-hop acts have successfully staked a claim within the space of "rock" music, thereby disrupting the cultural hierarchy that evidently still informs the value judgements made in reference to trap music. This is evident in the profound effect that triplet flow

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<sup>353</sup> Grossberg, "Is there rock after punk?" 96.

<sup>354</sup> Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 138.

and trap sounds have had on Top 40 radio, further strengthening hip-hop music's status as "the new Rock N' Roll," as posited by Kanye West. In "A Case For Reparations," Coates includes an anonymous quote from 1861: "By our unpaid labor and suffering, we have earned the right to the soil, many times over and over, and now we are determined to have it."<sup>355</sup> Migos embody this determination. Progress may be slow, but new-school points the way forward.

## **Conclusion and further research**

I began this study by illustrating hip-hop's current hegemonic position within the music industry. Following this, and to gain a better understanding of hip-hop's dominant status, I chronicled important events in its crossover by the middle of the decade and into the Golden Age. Though hip-hop's Golden Age is celebrated for its ability to communicate explicit politics to a mass audience vis-à-vis Public Enemy, I argued two things: first, that the Golden Age was not necessarily as unified a political movement as it may seem, and second, that further inquiry into hip-hop as both a political vehicle *and* a commercial product was necessary. With this in mind, I analyzed the social forces that informed hip-hop's increased commercial dominance in the late-1980s and early-1990s.

Analysis of the culture wars of the early-90s demonstrates the extent to which the production and consumption of hip-hop were influenced by external forces. These cultural assaults came in the form of legal restrictions on sampling and public disavowal of dominant gangsta rap of the '90s. Considering this, I argued that the because the legal attacks waged by the U.S. criminal justice system on the production of hip-hop can be seen to have a direct result on the increased "gangsta nihilism" of the 1990s, the subsequent condemnation of gangsta rap by members of the same very same

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<sup>355</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. June 22, 2018.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

government indicates what Bogazianos would call a “core of social betrayal”<sup>356</sup>.

Following this, I turned my attention to the rise of the hip-hop mogul in the late-1990s and early-2000s. I argued that though moguls such as Jay Z and Diddy are complex figures often subject to intense scrutiny, they can be seen at times to embody Du Bois’s ideal of the “Talented Tenth.” Furthermore, I posited that because moguls often occupy the dual space of being both African and American, tied at once to “America’s disenfranchised inner cities” and to entrepreneurial ideals of mainstream “American Dream” capitalism, they embody Du Bois’s idea of “double-consciousness.”

Following this, I used Jay Z and Diddy as a point of comparison to Southern hip-hop moguls Birdman and Master P, whose history of ill-advised business dealings suggests a less positive manifestation of moguldom. I then illustrated that despite this dysfunction, the turn of the millennium proved to be a major moment of crossover for Southern hip-hop. This led to our discussion of Lil Jon and crunk music, who, as I argued, has had an audible influence on the dominant styles of current new-school hip-hop. Though crunk receded in the mid-2000s, it was replaced by trap music, another iteration of Southern hip-hop originating in Atlanta, Georgia.

In my examination of trap, I used the work of Burton and Bogazianos to argue that Migos embody both the “upward” aspiration of Jay Z and the more inward and circular market logic of the trap. I argued further that the music of Migos can be seen as a hyper-intensification of the financially-focused rappers before them, as “pleasure cooked down to a crystal.” This discussion framed my following discussion of Migos’ song “Versace,” in which I further illustrated Migos in the context of Du Bois’s double-consciousness. I then used the “Versace” music video to analyze Migos’ performance of gender dynamics, upon which I concluded that Migos manifest Imani Perry’s concept of the hip-hop “badman,” which, though she argues is a response to the oppression of white

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<sup>356</sup> Bogazianos, *5 Grams: Crack Cocaine, Rap Music, and the War on Drugs*, 54.

patriarchy, ultimately gains power by subordinating women to a lesser role.

Chapter 3 began with an examination of the relationship between materialism, conspicuous consumption, and social status. This framed the following discussion of conspicuous consumption and African-American bling culture in the United States. Though I demonstrated that this phenomenon has raised the concern that conspicuous consumption can lead to further disenfranchisement, I instead contended that conspicuous consumption in African-American culture can be read as a response to systemic oppression. I argued further that the acquisition of luxury goods by members of the African-American community is a form of racial disruption whereby individuals lay claim to goods that have historically been reserved for society's white elite.

Next, I elucidated some of the criticism that new-school has faced for its perceived abandonment of hip-hop tradition in favour of brash conspicuous consumption. Additionally, I demonstrated how hip-hop criticism still often values hip-hop music based on whether or not it fulfills certain political priorities. These findings provide context for my argument that new-school hip-hop can be better understood if we analyze it in relation to the punk movement of the 1970s. Though punk music was perceived as the antithesis of the larger rock genre, Keightley argues that punk rockers nevertheless vied for traditional rock authenticity through an investment in differentiation.<sup>357</sup> From this examination, I argued that new-school hip-hop occupies a similar position to the 1970s punk music, whereby new-school artists ultimately participate in the tradition of hip-hop resistance through historical disassociation.

Furthering this discussion, I deliberated the meaning of the increasingly accepted sentiment "hip-hop is the new rock & roll," investigating some of the ways by which hip-hop stars have reordered culture and genre hierarchies, gaining empowerment through the adoption of rock

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<sup>357</sup> Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 138.

aesthetics. As a result, I argue that this staking claim in rock culture by new-school hip-hop artists can itself be read as an expression of rock authenticity. As Keightley notes, “Rock helped to reorder the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures, producing something that was simultaneously marginal and mainstream, anti-mass and mass, subordinate and dominant.”<sup>358</sup> Through new-school’s adoption of rock aesthetics, new-school hip-hop artists simultaneously perpetuate aspects of rock authenticity by similarly “reorder[ing] the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures.” By examining scholarly discourse on the punk movement of the 1970s, I argued that instead of signifying the “death” of hip-hop, the worldview of these new-school artists can be traced to the punk tradition of the 1970s wherein a similar type of resistance to dominant rock tradition through historical disassociation is identifiable. This points to a shared historical trajectory between rock and hip-hop that reinforces hip-hop’s status as “the new rock.” More broadly, hip-hop’s audible influence on the current sounds of Top 40 Radio positions hip-hop’s current hegemony no longer as merely a phenomenon of “crossover,” but one of “takeover.”<sup>359</sup>

Finally, I inquired into trap and new-school’s increased presence in Top 40 radio and the music of some of today’s biggest pop stars, further illustrating its hegemonic position that I described at the beginning of chapter 1. I contended that, despite worry of appropriation and inauthentic use of trap devices in Top 40 radio, the mere fact of America’s “remixing” as a result of new-school hip-hop is indicative of hip-hop’s power to change the world around it and challenge dominant musical and social hierarchies. Invoking Stuart Hall, I made the final contention that the critical evaluation of hip-hop based on a limited set of politics is problematic, as this line of thought can often be traced back to regressive assumptions surrounding race, art, and politics.

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 141

<sup>359</sup> Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop*, 637.

There are numerous avenues for further research. While Migos serve as a fruitful case study, they certainly do not encompass the entirety of the changes occurring in hip-hop in 2019. The astronomical rise of hip-hop star Cardi B (who is, coincidentally, married to Offset) in the last two years or so demands thorough analysis of the shifting structures of gender in hip-hop. It would also be worthwhile to see further inquiry into the prominence of the “Migos flow,” as I have contended that it is perhaps the most influential vocal technique in pop music in the last several years. Though Southern hip-hop music has long been sidelined from academic consideration, it is encouraging to see that there is already such insightful literature emerging with Burton, Westhoff, Bogazianos, and others. I would argue for more scholarly consideration of Southern hip-hop; it would be a missed opportunity not to delve further into the history of this music, considering trap is now the dominant style for both major hip-hop and major non-hip-hop artists.

This study has sought to bring further attention to hip-hop both as a political vessel *and* as a commercial force. It used a chronology of hip-hop history in order to bring about a more nuanced understanding new-school hip-hop’s position as both the dominant industry force and as “the new rock & roll.” It challenged critical dismissal of new-school hip-hop as anti-historical and politically unconcerned, instead offering a reading of this music in connection with the punk era of the 1970s and with rock music’s philosophy of social reorganization. It may have once made sense to evaluate hip-hop music based on whether or not it advocated a certain politics, but these criteria do not seem as applicable in the context of new-school hip-hop. On one level, this thesis operates as a defense of new-school hip-hop, a genre that is bursting with feverish creative energy. But on a broader level, this project hopes to beg the following question: when do old models of music criticism lose their utility in the discussion of new music? Hip-hop has long been at the vanguard



of popular music, constantly morphing, adapting, discovering exciting new modes of expression and vital new expressions of identity. It's about time that we catch up.

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## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Emmett Robinson Smith

**Post-secondary education:** University of Victoria  
Victoria, B.C., Canada  
2013-2017 B.Mus.

University of Western Ontario  
London, ON., Canada  
2017-2019 M.A.

**Related work experience:** Teaching Assistant  
Faculty of Information and Media Studies  
University of Western Ontario  
London, ON., Canada

**Publications:** “The Real Deal: Hip-hop Mixtape Artwork and Black Masculinity.” *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts*, no. 26 (June).  
<http://www.forumjournal.org/article/view/2778>.